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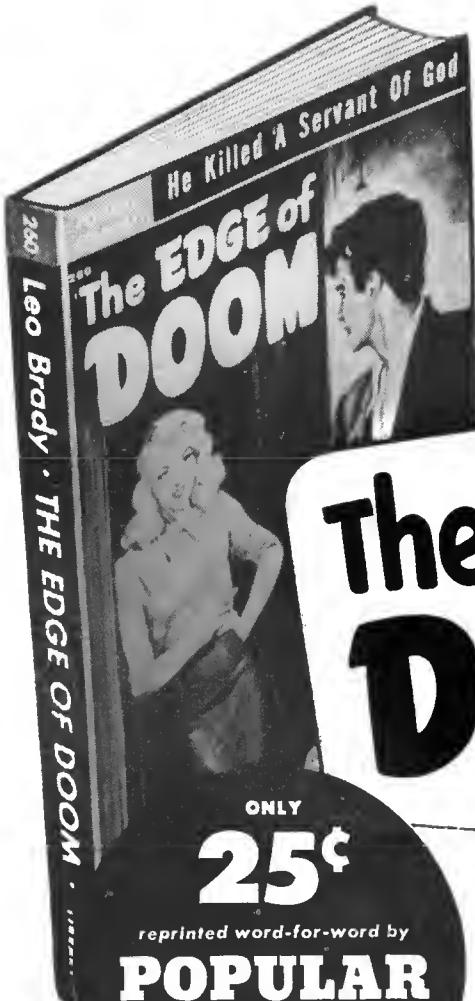
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By DEAN OWEN

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By STEWART STERLING



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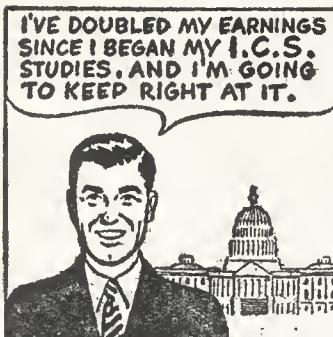
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by Stewart Sterling

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11

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KILL ME NEVER..........**Dean Owen** 44

Out on parole, with the police on his heels, Jim Foraway must keep on his toes to beat a frame that may send him to the chair!

A Detective Novel Classic

FOCUS ON MURDER..........**John L. Benton** 91

An encore of a short mystery novel in which Jerry Wade pits his camera against threatening racketeer guns!

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The deed was brutal—and the accuser strange

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Laura's father had been slain—and her turn was next!

and

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A department where readers, writers and the editor meet

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Headquarters

IT IS very seldom that we start to describe a forthcoming novelet by quoting from the story itself. However, the picture painted in *THE MURDER OF AN ORDINARY MAN*, by William Degenhard, is so graphic that we cannot find a better method of introducing to you—Lieutenant Gregory Maloney of the Homicide Bureau:

There was nothing pretentious about Lieutenant Gregory Maloney of the Homicide Bureau. Perhaps that was what was wrong with him. He was a small man, round faced, with mild blue eyes, a button nose, and a pinkish complexion that gave him a disconcertingly cherubic look. His gray snapbrim hat was disreputable, and the loose baggy suits he wore, made him seem soft and paunchy. No one around Headquarters took him very seriously.

He was considered a dull plodding sort, competent enough, but no more than an amiable bumbler who was a wizard only at putting together those elaborate jigsaw puzzles he was addicted to. The result was inevitable. He was usually given the leavings, the cases no one else wanted, the trivial and unimportant, the cases that never made the headlines. . . .

The Corpse of a Nobody

Because he is given the cases no one wants—which are, in fact, just too difficult for the other detectives to solve—Maloney is often awakened at all kinds of weird hours and in the most miserable weather. Nothing could be more miserable than the damp, foggy and dismal night on which they find the body

of that complete and utter nobody, George Cushing.

Maloney's assistant and Man Friday, the ubiquitous Eddie, is waiting for him in the hazy shadow of the statue of a distinguished cavalryman. It is right at the entrance of the park. Poor little George Cushing, about forty, owner of a hardware store, has been shot in the head. The bullet has almost completely pierced the man's skull—in fact, the M.E. has been able to extract it right at the scene of the crime. It looks like a slug from some sort of a .30-caliber gun of evident foreign make.

Why should anybody want to bump off this unobtrusive little man? It isn't robbery, as there are still fifty dollars in his pockets. From his stoutish, plain-looking wife, the detective and his assistant learn that Cushing has led a routine existence, always rising at the same time, having the same thing for breakfast, going through the same chores day after day. The Cushings never went anywhere.

That is why Mrs. Cushing can't understand whence came the mysterious phone call. Cushing merely told her he was going "out." At 9:30 in the evening? It was most unusual! Another woman—any enemies? Completely ridiculous! Anything in his life he wanted to hide? Well—she wouldn't know about that and became strangely silent.

The Only Secret

At this Cushing's seventy-year-old father speaks up. His late son's friend Arthur Greenfield will know about that.

It does not take long for the detective and his assistant to locate the aforesaid Greenfield. The only thing this personage can offer is the story of the time old man Jenkins, of the Jenkins Hardware Company, accused the late George Cushing of being a thief.

No, Cushing has not always been the proprietor of a hardware store. He was once a credit man. As such, he passed on the account of Mason and Brown, to the tune of ten thousand dollars. Mason and Brown had failed. Old man Jenkins openly accused Cushing of being in cahoots with the insolvent firm. Cushing, in a panic of self-accusation, left the firm and went into business for himself. That, so help him Hannah, was the only secret in George Cushing's life!

So poor old George is dead! Too bad! Any help he could possibly be—

Right outside the door, Detective Maloney and Eddie decide that one Greenfield is concealing something. His manner seems too furtive. They even hear the man dial a number on the phone. Thanks to their radar training in the war, they figure it is Cushing's number by counting the clicks. This is a most important clue. Hold it—wait! Mr. Greenfield will soon be out.

A Matter of Ballistics

He is and much sooner than they expect. He is carrying a package. Furthermore, he spots the detectives lurking in the shadow. Mr. Greenfield immediately starts running. For a man of his age the gentleman in question can reel off a pretty clip.

But it's not fast enough for Eddie's flying tackle. It is not enough for Maloney's dive for the package as Greenfield flings it away. Unwrapped, said package proves to be a gun. Eddie is jubilant. This is it! Also, why did Greenfield call up Cushing's number—or did he? Counting the clicks of a whirling phone, when you are several feet away—

Eddie is tersely told not to get his hopes too high. Remember the murder is committed with a .30 caliber foreign gun. This is a Colt .45. So Arthur Greenfield is allowed to go home.

[Turn page]

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And now word comes from Ballistics that the slug was fired from a Mauser 7.63. Who would have such a gun—evidently brought back as a souvenir from the late unpleasantness on the other side of the water? Eddie finds out, after a weary tramp of nearly a week, that Victor Bromwell, late of the 261st Infantry, claimed that he had seen one in the home of his partner, Andrew Frost. After another chase, Frost claims that his flat was burglarized and the gun taken. So up the flue goes another clue!

Another Murder

This isn't the only inkling that goes haywire. But Lieutenant Gregory Maloney, with bulldog determination and sagacity of thought that would give credit to the great Sherlock himself, never gives up. Then there is another murder victim—one of the suspects.

But let's halt right here, folks. We've even given you a bit more than that proverbial peek under the curtain. Once the mental bloodhound instincts of Detective Maloney are aroused, if we may coin a phrase, we go on from there with a zip. In spite of all the difficulties that continually confront him—and Eddie too—Gregory Maloney likes his job. We give you fair warning—you're going to like Maloney. We're sure you're going to relish every sentence of **THE MURDER OF AN ORDINARY MAN!**

A West Coast Mystery

Shoulder to shoulder with the featured yarn, we also present **FRAME-UP IN 'FRISCO**, an exciting novelet by Philip Ketchum.

We fully realize that the worthy inhabitants of the beautiful and thriving city on the shores of the Golden Gate do not always like to have the name of their town thus abbreviated. So perhaps we should have called this yarn "Frame-Up in San Francisco." But wouldn't that be a little long? Also, isn't the other way more pleasingly alliterative? So citizens of San Francisco, we hereby humbly apologize for the abbreviation. For the tale itself, we need no apology whatsoever!

Nick Fanner comes back there after

an absence of four years. He has been offered a job with Proctor & Knowles and his future seems assured. He left the old town under considerable of a cloud. A highly emotional young man at that time, he rose up dramatically in court at the end of a trial and swore he would return some day and kill Arthur Standish. He claimed that the aforesaid Standish framed his father into a swindling rap.

So here he is, back in the town where he has made his threat. He is a guest in the apartment of a man known to him as Sam Caldwell, there on Telegraph Hill. Also present are two girls, one known as Nina Alcott—the other simply as Carol. While dancing with the former to a tune on the radio, Nina whispers desperately to him to get out of town now—at once—there is no time to be lost! She also slips him her address.

A very short while later, the two girls leave. Fenner, overwhelmed by the novelty of the situation, decides to pay no attention to the warning. Before retiring, the palpable Caldwell tells Fenner that Proctor & Knowles know of his threat against Standish. Furthermore, Standish is a prosperous citizen. Outside of beginning the new job, Fenner is also anxious to see his old pal of that Anzio foxhole, Dave Galloway, and young York, now a lawyer, not to mention his old flame, Maggie Harrison.

But never was a young man more rudely awakened on the following day! The chap known as Caldwell, is, as expected, gone. Going to a newsstand, Fenner sees a glaring headline to the effect that Arthur Standish has been shot in his home with a Colt .45 and that he, Nick Fenner, is suspected of the crime!

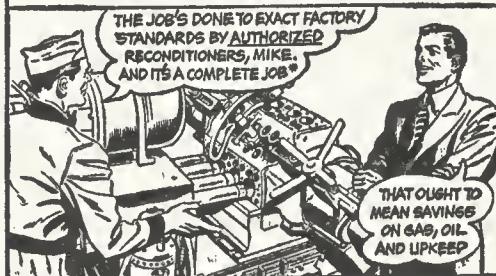
Evidence Piles Up!

Events now happen with alarming speed and evidence piles up against him in a damning flow! Going to the address that the girl, Nina, had given him, he finds that she, too, his only known alibi, has been foully murdered—and he is accused of that crime as well. Furthermore, the police have gone to the ferry locker where Fenner checked his

(Continued on page 127)



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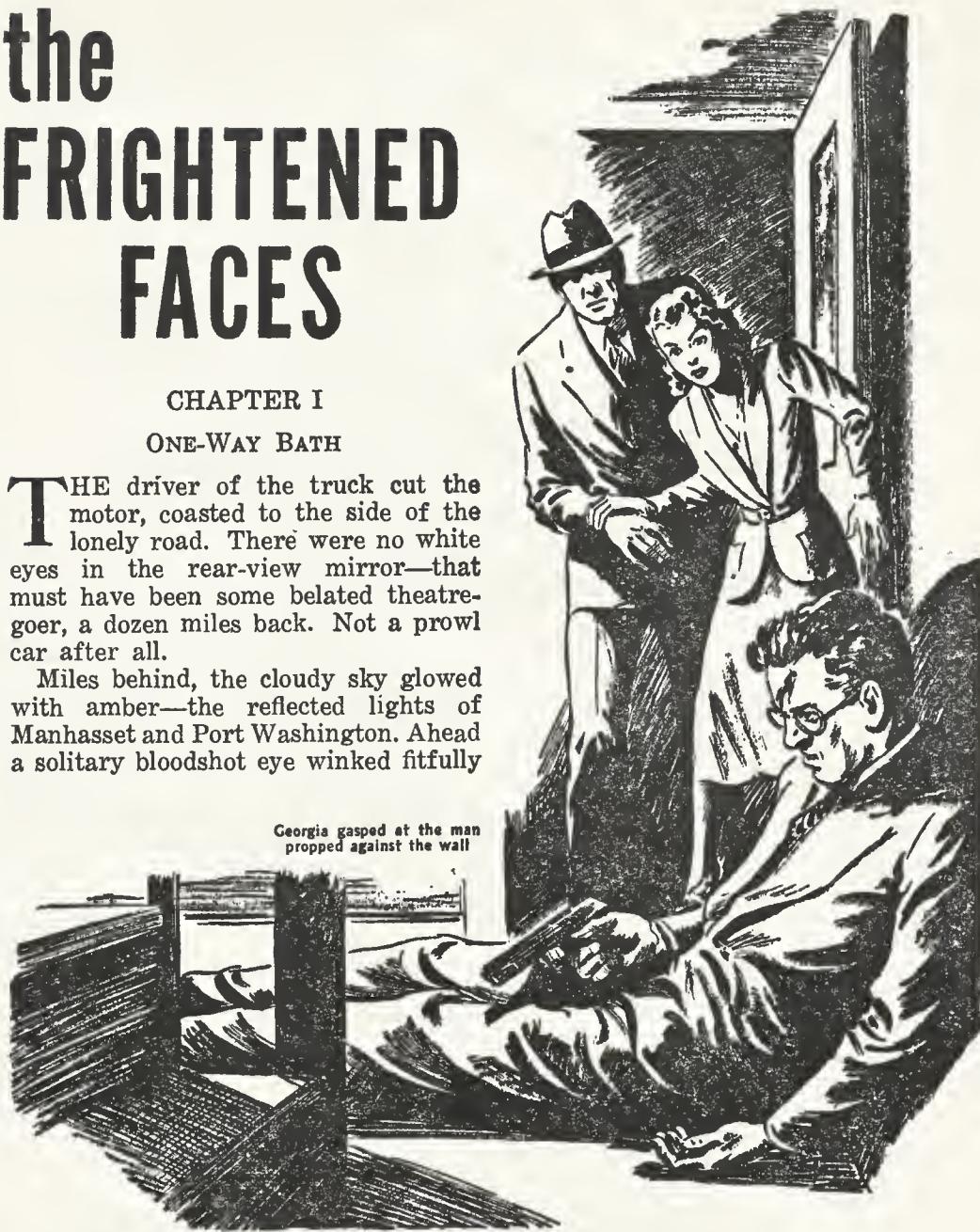
the FRIGHTENED FACES

CHAPTER I ONE-WAY BATH

THE driver of the truck cut the motor, coasted to the side of the lonely road. There were no white eyes in the rear-view mirror—that must have been some belated theatre-goer, a dozen miles back. Not a prowler car after all.

Miles behind, the cloudy sky glowed with amber—the reflected lights of Manhasset and Port Washington. Ahead a solitary bloodshot eye winked fitfully

Georgia gasped at the man propped against the wall



When \$75,000 in sables goes the way of all loot, Detective Don Marko is confronted by a fur-stealing mystery that's a veritable skin game!

A DON MARKO NOVELET BY **STEWART STERLING**

The Pretty Shoplifter Begged to Be Arrested,

some distance up the road—an isolated gas station. At the right sombre-shadowed pine and spruce marched close-ranked beside the concrete.

Across the road where it curved sharply to the right a sand-bank loomed palely in the gloom, its wind-scooped hollows dropping a dozen feet from the level of the highway to the dull mirror of the water. The driver nodded with satisfaction. A truck driver at high speed could easily miss a curve like this.

The headlights went off. With the bright glare no longer glinting over the water the darkness crept closer to the truck, pressing in on it from the woods which seemed to sigh with melancholy expectancy in the night breeze. The driver got out, went around to the rear of the truck, unlocked the swinging doors, cupping a pencil flashlight in one hand to give what illumination was necessary.

The delivery truck was empty except for some odds and ends of wrapping paper and cardboard cartons—and the figure of a man lying on the bottom boards with his legs doubled up so his knees rested against the side panel. He made no movement when the flashlight touched briefly on his face but he spoke.

"I been chewin' it over." His voice was harsh and high-pitched with fear. "I come to the conclusion maybe you're right. I just ought to forget about the whole thing. Go away somewheres an'—"

"You're going away somewhere, all right." There was no suggestion of a sneer in the driver's tone, no malicious humor. "So you can forget it—like you said."

"I mean just skip the whole business." The man on the floor struggled to sit up but the cloth-backed shipping-tape which bound his wrists and knees also fastened his ankles at the back of his thighs so it was impossible to straight-

en his legs. "What you takin' outa my pocket?"

WITH this the driver held out a thin roll of bills so the trickle of light showed the green money-color. "I'm not taking anything out. Putting this in. So you'll have something for that little trip, see?"

The man's face puckered with swift alarm as the driver's strong hands hauled him out of the truck where he could see the deserted stretch of road, the lonely woods, the beach. His eyes turned toward the beach.

"What you gonna do with me?"

"Give you a bath." The driver lifted him, lugged him across the highway to the rim of the scooped-out sand-bank. "You stink. Anybody who'd do what you did stinks. So you need a bath."

"You're fixin' to murder me!"

"Nah, nah. Never killed anybody yet. Not going to begin with you. That homicide stuff, that's liable to get a person in trouble. I've had my belly-full of trouble already. Don't want any with John Law. Nah."

The man moaned in terror as he was dropped but the fall cut the protest short. It was only a few feet—the bank was soft. He rolled down the little slope like a log, splashed into the shallow water where the tide lapped hard wet sand.

"Go ahead. Holler if you want to." The driver scrambled down the sand-bank to stand beside him. "Maybe there's a cuddle-up couple in the woods somewheres around. Maybe they'll hear you."

The man lay on his side with one shoulder and the back of his head in the water. His mouth was wide open, the lips drawn tight against his teeth. His nostrils flared. The skin on his forehead was tautly wrinkled. His eyes squinted as if to shut out the thing he saw above him.

Proving Something Was Rotten in Nimblett's!

"You're going to drown me," he whispered.

"Not me—water might though. In case you can't keep your head above." The driver stopped, seized the man's jacket, rolled him into deeper water, face down. "Anybody happens to find you later on there won't be any doubt about your drownin'—no matter how it happened."



DON MARKO

There was a fierce threshing of water, a long pause. One noisy bubble blurted to the surface.

The driver waited long enough to light a cigarette and smoke half of it before wading in to retrieve what looked like a soggy bundle of clothes.

The cigarette was still glowing by the time all the cloth-tape had been removed and the body carried back to the truck, propped behind the wheel. The motor roared. The truck backed slowly.

Gears shifted. Headlights went on. The right-hand cab door came open. The truck rushed forward, gaining speed. The driver wrenched the wheel

to the left, dropped to the concrete as the truck plunged over the slanting bank of sand.

The headlights danced crazily on the water as the front wheels bounced. The force of the splashing plunge twisted the truck on its side, sent it lurching drunkenly into deep water, submerged it completely. The lights were instantly extinguished.

The driver flipped the cigarette butt into the water in a sparking arc, turned, climbed the bank, began to whistle cheerfully, *Ain't We Got Fun?*

* * * * *

The stone facade of Nimblett's stood as a monument to magnificence amid the crush and bustle of Fifth Avenue's Saturday afternoon traffic. Ten stately stories above the hooting taxis and the surging throngs impatient for the green light—a full block of glittering window displays to hold the swarming passers-by.

Nimblett's was a name to suggest dignified prestige and exclusive extravagance—even the salesclerks cultivated an air of deliberate *hauteur*.

But there was no haughtiness in the manner of the slim prematurely gray-haired man at the desk in the office behind frosted glass lettered CHIEF: STORE PROTECTION.

Don Marko's ordinarily pleasant features were lined with worry. His normally restless gray eyes were now merely harried. He felt beaten down, utterly tired of concealing the fact that in the matter of the vanished delivery truck and its missing driver the chief of store detectives was absolutely at his wit's end.

THE known facts were simple, if nothing else was. Yesterday afternoon, March 24, at 1:17 P. M., delivery unit No. 8 in charge of driver Lyle J.

Burger, Employee Badge 2049, had been checked out of Nimblett's shipping bay with a full load of packages. Since then, so far as could be determined, none of the customers to whom he should have delivered purchased items had seen him nor had Burger's wife nor any of his friends or acquaintances.

The value of the packages checked off and loaded into Unit No. 8 had still to be determined but it would run close to seventy-five thousand dollars, due largely to the inclusion of fourteen genuine Russian blue sable stoles, retailing at \$3,750 each. That such valuable furs had been included in a regular truck shipment was in itself extraordinary but the customer had demanded immediate delivery and at the time no armored vehicle had been available.

His phone rang. Marko eyed it irritably, picked it up expecting it would be the front office peevishly inquiring why he wasn't making more progress in this distressing matter—or headquarters requesting those lists describing the items of merchandise in Unit No. 8's two hundred-odd packages—or the bonding company demanding more details of Lyle Burger's recent doings.

"Protection," he said brusquely.

"Don. This is Alice. I've got an AF in costume jewelry."

"Okay, okay." He didn't like to be curt with Alice Stein. She was the best operative he had on the all-important first floor. If she reported an Amateur, Female, shoplifting at the cheap jewelry counter, she would know exactly what she was talking about. But—

"You handle it, Al. I'm in over my head. Get the stuff, give her a warning—"

"But, Don, listen!" The customarily restrained Miss Stein was excited. "This girl knows I'm watching her. Still she keeps on snatching this stuff."

"Well," he said soothingly, "a klepto. Best thing is to—"

"No, she's not." Alice was definite. "You know how *they* are—always bland and apologetic even when you catch

'em red-handed. They act sly—you know—but not scared stiff the way this girl is. She's absolutely frozen-faced. She's so frightened. But still she keeps on sticking brooches and earrings down her boozum!"

"Yair." Imitation precious-gem brooches—at \$3.50! Plated earrings—at \$2.00 the pair! While he was stewing about what had happened to seventy-five-thousand-dollars' worth of merchandise, to say nothing of a delivery truck and one trusted employee. "Well. Put the arm on her. Bring her up."

"Immejut." Alice hung up

MARKO dismissed it from his mind temporarily. Just another one of those routine things. His staff picked up a dozen or so light-fingered ladies every day. He had to give them the once-over, decide in each case whether to throw a scare into any individual thief and send her away in a cold sweat—or ship her over to the precinct for more permanent measures.

Most of the pickups were pitiful amateurs, young girls who wanted nylons they couldn't afford, boys who thought they could get away with a gold fountain pen while the clerk was looking the other way.

One out of every five might be a professional, a boxworker who stooped down behind counters to grab a dozen boxes of expensive stuff from the shelves. But none of them were as damaging as the package thieves who worked outside the store, stealing stuff off the delivery platforms.

There'd been a hell of a lot of that going on at Nimblett's lately. Don hadn't been able to put a stop to it though he'd tried all the usual remedies. And now this disappearing truck! The Chief of Store Protection would himself be going on to another job in a lower-grade store at a smaller salary if he didn't get action fast on this.

He read the card from the Personnel Department for the tenth time. Lyle Burger had been with Nimblett's for



Marko swung his gun as the driver lashed out with a tire iron

three years, had come here from a driver's job with a credit furniture store where he'd worked two years. His record of Absents was good. He kept up his payments in the store's Employee Saving Fund regularly.

UNDER *Outside Interests* the card said Burger drank beer in moderation, smoked cigarettes, went to church a couple of times a year, liked to bowl, followed the baseball battles mostly in the papers, took his wife dancing once a month or so, played a little gin rummy and partner pinochle for peanuts.

Didn't sound like the activities of a bird who'd hi-jack his own truckload. Didn't sound like anything except a steadygoing Joe Average, the kind of guy Nimblett's liked to hire.

Knuckles played a rapid tattoo on his door.

Marko slid the card under some reports about the package thefts. "Come in."

The girl Alice Stein pushed ahead of her into the office was a small slender blonde with pert boyish features and great dark eyes that stared at Marko wildly. She wore a thin suit of a quality Nimblett's disdained to carry, a low-cut blouse that showed suggestive curves, inexpensive shoes with the heels badly worn, a handsome silver fox neckpiece that was out of keeping with the rest of her outfit.

Alice put six pieces of jewelry on the desk. "She had these on her person when taken into custody, Mister Marko."

"Yair." He barely glanced at them. The lot wouldn't be worth twenty dollars retail. "What's your name, young lady?"

"Wheeler—Betty Wheeler." The girl spoke jerkily as if under great nervous strain.

He filled it in on the Detained card, though he knew it was phoney. This kid had none of the earmarks of the professional shoplifter and if she was an amateur she'd never have given her

right name without pleading not to let her family know of her trouble.

"Live with your folks?"

"Haven't any." The tenseness seemed to be draining out of her face a little as she watched him. "I live alone."

"Where?"

"Five-forty West Sixty-third. A rooming' house."

He laid down his pen, stood up, came around the desk. "There isn't any five-hundred block on West Sixty-third. We're not going to get anywhere until you decide to level with us. Sit down there."

He pushed her gently toward the straight-backed chair, lifting the silver fox neckpiece off as if to drop it on his desk beside her.

But he kept hold of it, turning it to look at the place where the store label had been taken out.

Alice bent to examine it. "Mister Marko!"

He nodded. "I know. If it isn't one of those snatched off our shipping deck last week it's a twin sister." He blew on the fur to make sure it was genuine and not merely dyed to the hair roots. "Where'd you get this, Miss Wheeler?"

Startled dismay was in her voice: "A—a friend gave it to me."

"What's his name?" Marko was mildly interested in discovering why she should be so alarmed at the idea of having a stolen fur in her possession when she'd already been caught with the jewelry on her. But what puzzled him most was how she could have dared to come into Nimblett's wearing that fur anyhow.

"I don't know his name," the girl cried. "He's some fellow I just call Freddy."

He smiled sourly. "You don't look like the kind of girl who'd take a present of furs from a boy-friend when you don't even know his name. You just think it over. If you can remember this bird's name and something about him, maybe we can find a way of stalling any charges against you for this." He

touched one of the simulated-emerald brooches.

The girl shook her head. "I don't know anything about him. I can't remember anything. I'm not going to try either. Aren't you going to send me to prison?"

Marko said, "We might have to get around to that if you won't cooperate."

The girl twisted around so she could fling an elbow over the back of the chair. She pillow'd her head on her arm, sobbing in a sudden convulsive frenzy. "You've got to! You've got to send me to jail! I'm a thief. You can't just let me go! You *can't*!"

Marko stared, eyebrows elevated, at Alice Stein. She shrugged, held her hands out helplessly, palms up.

He said, "We'd better break a rule. You leave me alone with her a few minutes. Take this down to Furs and verify it."

CHAPTER II

HELL-BENT FOR JAIL



ARKO reached across, took the girl's handbag out of her lap. She didn't try to stop him, didn't raise her head.

He opened the bag, slid the contents onto his blotter-pad.

There wasn't much. Lipstick from the five-and-dime, compact ditto. Matchpack from *The Chick Inn*, Jamaica Boulevard. Another pack advertising aspirin. Stub of a numbered check on manila cardboard—the word *Cuban* was scrawled on the back of it.

Green suede purse with a dollar forty-one in coins. Two Yale keys. Bobby pins. Handkerchief with the initial *G* embroidered in corner. Metal pencil minus a lead. And no letters, bills, circulars or envelopes—no address book or phone numbers. But tucked in the zipper compartment of the bag was a single folded blank check from the Citizens Commercial Trust, Jamaica branch.

"You went to quite a bit of trouble to conceal your identity, didn't you?" He put all the stuff back in the bag except the manila check stub, which he flicked under the pile of reports. He thought she was covertly watching him but she wouldn't have noticed that casual movement of his thumb.

She raised her head, blinked at him with her eyes swimming in tears. "I don't want to talk about it. You caught me and arrested me and what more is there to say?"

"Quite a lot." He studied her uneasily, reminding himself not to be swayed by his sympathies. That was always his greatest danger, letting his feelings for people of this sort influence his judgment. It wouldn't be difficult to have feelings about this attractive youngster. She wasn't much like some of the hard-boiled babies who were brought to his office.

"You might tell me why you're putting on an act," he said. "You're not a professional or you'd know whatever you grabbed off the costume-jewelry counter wouldn't be worth the risk you ran. You couldn't hock it for the price of a good meal. You aren't wearing any jewelry, not even a wristwatch. Still you cram a lot of ornamental doodads inside your brassiere!"

"You give me a phoney address—probably a prop name, too. You look as if you could use a few bucks for new clothes, yet you're wearing a necklace you could pawn for seventy-five or a hundred anywhere. We know what it's worth because it was one of three stolen off our delivery platform a little while back."

The girl pulled a second handkerchief from her jacket pocket, wiped her eyes. "Why don't you—run me in and let it go at that?"

"Kind of hopped on getting behind bars, aren't you? How'd you like it if we sent you down to the City Hospital instead, so they can give you a good psychiatric examination?"

"Oh, no!" She came up out of the

chair, stood rigidly with her fists clenched by her sides. "You wouldn't do *that*!" The expression of uncontrollable fear came back into her face. "There's nothing wrong with me—mentally. I'm perfectly all *right*!"

The phone rang. "Protection."

"I'm calling in behalf of a young lady I understand has been apprehended in your store for—ah—pilfering." The man at the other end of the line was grave, embarrassed. "I am authorized to tell you that the full amount covering any articles she may—ah—have purloined, will be delivered to your office immediately in cash, if you release her without any attendant publicity."

A NON-COMMITTAL grunt was Marko's answer. "We've taken a number of young ladies into custody. Which one are you interested in?"

"A very young one. She's twenty-one. Very pretty."

"What's her name?" Marko had held this sort of conversation often enough but it was peculiar that anyone had learned of the girl's arrest so quickly.

"Her first name"—the man became cautious—"is Georgia. I'd rather not mention any other name on the telephone, you understand."

"No I don't. Are you a relative?"

"I'm representing a relative, sir. If you'll state the amount—?"

"Listen." Marko held the receiver away from his ear so the girl could hear the voice. "We can't do business in the dark. If you'll have one of Georgia's family, someone who can vouch for her, come to my office, it ought to be possible to arrange—"

"Oh!" The girl clapped her clenched fists to her mouth.

"Her family," the man answered smoothly, "doesn't wish to appear in this matter at all. You can appreciate their reasons."

Marko saw the girl drop one hand to the desk to steady herself, was sure she recognized the voice on the phone. "Suppose we do release her—what guarantee

do we have she won't pull the same—"

She slid quietly against the desk, sagged to her knees, crumpled on the floor. The voice said, "What did you say?"

Marko got up. "You come around—maybe we can straighten it out somehow."

The man at the other end hesitated. "I'll be glad to send someone around with the money. You just tell me the amount. If you don't know exactly what will cover it make a good generous estimate. You'll have it in twenty minutes."

"That sounds a little like a bribe offer, mister." Marko set the phone on the desk where he could hear it and talk into it. He picked the girl up, set her back in the chair. "But I'll be glad to talk to you anytime. What'd you say your name was?"

"I'm sorry you don't see fit to allow her to go." The question was evaded.

"Well. Possibly we will." Marko made it sound casual. "We recovered all the stolen merchandise. If we can get a proper statement from her she might be home tonight. Still it would make it a lot simpler if you'd drop around."

"I'll try to, I really will. It will be necessary for me to discuss it with— with her folks. But thank you very much for your fair-mindedness, sir." The instrument clicked.

Marko said to himself aloud while dialing, "Now there's a very disappointed gent. I wonder why he wants to get her loose when she's so set on being jugged?"

When his number answered he asked for Lieutenant MacRollins.

"Mac? Don. I've got a thing here, a dame. No, not personal. I'd like her held on a short affidavit without coming up before the judge until Monday morning. Think you can handle that? Open and shut—petty larceny. Witnesses and admission of guilt. But there's a couple of little points I'd like to clear up before we go to bat. Thanks, Mac. I'll hustle her right over."

Alice knocked. When she opened the door she gawked. "Oh, oh! Whatsit—malnutrition? Or did you scare her into a conniption?"

"Soinebody did." He told her about the phone call. "She's paralyzed for fear we'll turn her loose so this gent on the phone can get hold of her. We can block that, of course. But where's it get us?"

"Mister Zilberkeit says he'll go on the witness stand and swear this fox is from our stock. He can't say for sure it was one of those that were stolen, naturally, but—"

Marko was examining an address on the Personnel Record card. "Know where Lyle Burger lives?"

"Brooklyn somewhere." Alice chafed the girl's wrists.

"Jamaica. A few blocks from the bank where this babe, or someone she knows has a checking account." He reached for his topcoat. "After I drop her at the precinct house I might take a quick peek around there."

THE shoe-repair man looked at the check stub Marko held out. "That ain't ours, mister."

"I wasn't sure," Marko said, "which shop my wife meant."

"Looks like one of Amadeo's. You could try him."

"Where's his place?"

"Three blocks." The cobbler pointed. "Corner Greenlace."

Not bad, Marko thought, tooling his car through the Jamaica Boulevard traf-

fic jam. Not bad if the check he'd taken from the girl's bag *was* from Amadeo's. Must be a couple of thousand shoe-repair shops in the metropolitan area.

If it turned out Georgia Whoever-She-Was had taken her shoes to be fixed here in the Greenlace Park area Marko had hit a long shot smack on the nose. He might not have followed through on the scent suggested by the bank check if it hadn't been for that torn bit of green pulp paper, the sort used for transfers on Jamaica-bound bus lines.

Amadeo was an affable aproned Italian with a mouthful of tacks, a handful of hammer. He accepted the check, turned it over to read the scribbling on its back.

"Put on Cuban heels, *si*. But ain't-a ready till Monday night. I tol' Miss Carr I'm rush to death. She says-a no hurry."

"My mistake," Marko smiled. "Monday it is."

There was a mistake somewhere, all right. The name Carr jangled an alarm in Marko's memory. Nimblett's head checker in the shipping room was Sam Carr!

There wouldn't be any need of dropping around to the bank now—Marko had enough to go on. Whether the girl was Mrs. Sam Carr or Georgia Somebody-Else—Marko wanted a fast look at the Carr residence.

He used the phone book. *Carr, Sam'l, res.* was at 81 Greenlace Lane.

It was a half dozen blocks east—one

[Turn page]

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of the new cottage developments. Rows of neat white six-roomers, each with a patch of lawn, a clump of shrubbery in front—most with a one-car garage in the rear, some with white picket fences. Eighty-one was the end cottage on a mud-rutted lane petering off into marshy bog.

He parked in mud halfway to the hubs, picked his way through puddles to the porch. The shades were down. Nobody answered the bell. The front door was locked.

He went around back. In the drive were tire marks, marks too broad for any ordinary car, too deep for anything but a loaded truck. The Nimblett fleet was shod with that interlocking diamond tread too.

There was no truck in sight. The garage was open, empty. The tire marks didn't lead to the garage anyway. They swerved off onto what would someday be a flower bed, stopped within a foot of a high railed stoop.

He climbed cement steps, tried the locked door, peered in a kitchen window. The floor, the white enameled table and the gas stove were all littered with torn cartons, crumpled wrapping paper, wads of excelsior, paper shavings. No Christmas morning in the biggest family after the presents had all been opened ever looked like that, Marko thought with a queer prickling sensation at the back of his neck.

He put his hand on the sill to brace himself for a further look, felt something jab his hand. Splinters!

Somebody'd been working on that window. The wood at the top of the bottom sash had been forced with a knife or a jimmy. The catch had been turned—the window was unlocked.

Sensible thing to do, he decided, was go back to his car, drive in to Jamaica, report his suspicions to the nearest police station. But if there was anyone in the house he'd already have been alerted by Marko's actions—and would make a getaway.

On the other hand, if there wasn't

anyone inside, Marko would save time by getting in and using Carr's phone. He shoved up the window, listened for a minute, heard nothing, crawled over the sill into the kitchen.

He was knee-deep in crackling paper, heavy brown wrapping, lighter pieces of french gray with the cerise pencil-stripes which were as much Nimblett's trademark as the name of the store itself. But there was none of the missing merchandise.

Sam Carr—Marko could hardly bring himself to believe it! A mild-mannered mouse of a man, a sad-eyed, droopy-mustached individual in thick-lensed spectacles—the sort of fussy precise clerk who still wore those old-fashioned straw cuff protectors over his coat sleeves winter and summer.

Carr had been shipping clerk, then assistant checker for years, had been advanced to head checker only a few months ago. Just about the time the big losses from package thieves had begun to plague Nimblett's Protection staff!

Marko moved toward the front of the house. The phone would probably be in the living-room.

It looked like a connivance setup, all right. A checker had the responsibility of seeing that packages got onto the truck for which they were intended. A fellow like Sam Carr, working with a driver, could easily tip him off when an especially valuable bunch of parcels were on board.

Burger's truck had evidently been driven out here and around to the back door. The packages had been unwrapped and the loot driven away.

But why the jimmied window? Why had the unwrapping of merchandise been done here at Sam Carr's? Why in particular had Georgia Carr—if that was actually her name—been so hell-bent on being hustled into a jail cell?

The front of the house was dark with all the shades down—it was already near-dusk outside. He felt around the corner of the hall for the light switch

in the living-room, found it, clicked it.

It was as if he'd touched the trigger to a bomb. The lights flashed on—at the same instant a paralyzing smash on the head knocked him forward, stumbling, to his knees.

Instinctively he rolled on his left side, putting up his right hand to break the force of another blow. His left hand dropped to the carpet to brace himself. The weapon struck him across the right ear. It felt as if his head had exploded with a shattering concussion.

But he didn't lose consciousness. He retained his senses sufficiently to catch a split-second glimpse of a face in the round ornamental mirror on the wall opposite—a face so terribly contorted by fear that none of the man's features registered as anything identifiable. The flashing impression was merely of white teeth, of the whites of eyes beneath a visored cap.

A third numbing shock knocked Marko against a coffee table, toppled it over. A glass cigarette box slid off against a table-leg, smashed into shards.

Marko wondered vaguely why it made no noise when it broke, why he didn't hear the click of the light switch when it became suddenly dark again.

CHAPTER III

TWO-TIMER

MARKO had always felt that one of the compensations in being a store sleuth was that you didn't have to cart around a gun. You rarely had to employ violence as other detectives did. He never would have fitted a job where you had to maul a suspect around in the back room to get a confession. He was always inclined to feel sorry for the poor dopes he had to arrest, to give them the breaks when he could.

But now, when the roaring in his ears had quieted down to where he could remember where he was and what had

happened, when Carr's living-room floor stopped teetering back and forth like the deck of a ship in a storm, he felt among other things a sudden savage thirst for blood.

His professional problem temporarily took second place to a primitive desire to get his hands on the individual who had battered him so his right ear, his neck and his coat collar were wet and warm with gore—his head one horrible hammering ache.

It had been this same way once before, back there at Bastogne. Up to that time he'd done his job in the Airborne with no great hatred of the Germans. He'd listened without much enthusiasm to the efforts of his superior officers to get him to feel properly ferocious toward the enemy.

But until that morning when Fritz had lobbed a sputtering hand grenade into the shell crater where he was holding out, had nearly blown his arm off, Marko'd never really been mad clear to his marrow. Then he was roused to a cold implacable rage—and since then it always made him feel queer when he looked at the silver medal in his bureau drawer—getting a decoration because he was so fighting-crazy he'd simply forgotten to be scared.

Now as he pulled his knees under him, cutting his hand on one of the fragments of the cigarette box, he had that same mercurial surge of rage. Any natural instinct to holler "police" was smothered beneath the urgency of his need to settle matters with his assailant with no outside interference. Once on his feet he found he wasn't as wobbly as he'd expected to be. He put on the light, looked for a weapon. A leopard of black glass snarled at him from the mantel. He grabbed it.

A quick search of dining-room, kitchen, bath and ground-floor bedroom revealed no lurking attacker. He used the phone, got through to Nimblett's, to Pat Rellt, head of Shipping.

"Pat? Don Marko. Is Carr where he can overhear?"

"Crysake, no." The stolid Irishman who'd been on the carpet so many times recently in the matter of the mysterious package thefts was understandably touchy. "He's not even around."

"Why not?"

"He punched out around two o'clock. One of those dizzy spells that been hittin' him lately. I told him to beat it home before he balled up our check sheets again. Why? What's wrong?"

"What isn't?" Marko dabbed his handkerchief delicately at his ear. "Switch me to Miss Stein, will you?"

So Carr had conveniently been taken sick about the time Georgia'd been pinched. Could that meek little guy possibly have disguised his voice so Marko hadn't recognized it during that peculiar phone conversation? Could that Milque-toast countenance have been the frightened face he'd seen in the mirror?

Alice Stein came on the line. "Mister Zilberkeit's been hounding me to find out if there's any chance of our recovering those sable stoles, Mister Marko."

"Tell him there might be, Al."

"He says the Gaekwar—or however you pronounce it—insists on having duplicates delivered before he sails tomorrow."

"Too bad about the Gaekwar. Maybe he'll have to give away chocolate bars instead of furs to his diplomatic lady friends when he gets to London. Listen, do something for me. Tell Zilberkeit I want to see him. Ask him to run up to my office, wait for me."

"What time'll you be back?"

"Pretty quick. Point is, get up to Herb's office and give it a going-over while he's out."

SHE was startled. "What you want me to look for, Don?"

"Don't know exactly, Al. Anything offbeat. Names or phone numbers of furriers or wholesalers. Bank deposit book. Main thing, don't get caught looking."

"Do what I can. You all right?"

"Yair, sure. If my voice sounds funny it must be this connection." He hung up, went in the bathroom, ran cold water, did what he could with his cut face and swollen ear.

He went out the back way to look for a particular label among the hundreds of package wrappers. He found it after a minute—the long gray and cerise box with the chaste gold and gray panel on which had been lettered: *His Highness the Gaekwar of Bagoda; Suite MM, Park Plaza Towers, Fifth Avenue, New York.*

He closed the window, went out the back door, leaving it unlocked. The fur box went into the trunk compartment of his car.

Lyle Burger lived on Meechum Place half a mile away. It was one of a row of narrow connected brick houses, undistinguishable save for the differing window curtains. The Burger windows were lighted, the shades up. Marko could see into a comfortable living-room—but no one was visible.

He rang the bell. High heels clattered swiftly. The woman who opened the door was plump and solidly built, a sullen-eyed brunette with pouting lips. Her hair came down in a thick plait over the nape of a neck ornamented in front by a double chin.

"What is it?" Her tone was querulous.

"Mrs. Burger?" Marko saw her eyes widen at the sight of blood on his collar. "I'm Don Marko from Nimblett's."

"Oh. Come in." She stood aside. "If you're wanting to know, have I heard from Lyle, I have not. I don't expect to either until I hear the police caught him. Sit down, make yourself comfortable."

He dropped into an easy chair but it was too chilly in the house to be comfortable. The place was clean and tidy except for a pile of men's socks spilling over from a sewing basket on an end table across the room. "You think he just cut loose and ran away, Mrs. Burger?"

"What else *can* I think!" She brushed a stray hair back off her forehead, petulantly. "He didn't even call up to say he wasn't coming home last night. An' not a peep from him all day though Lord knows I answered enough telephone calls asking about him. The cops—and that surety company and you. I haven't *dared* to stir out of the house all day for fear there'd be a call about their catching him."

"Did your husband ever stay away from home overnight before?"

"Indeed he did. Once a month or so he'd call up and say he had to make a special trip out to Montauk or up in Connecticut somewhere and wouldn't be able to get back. Once he had motor trouble, so he claimed."

"I kept thinking all the time there was something funny. He'd never leave a phone number at wherever he was supposed to be staying, always said maybe he'd sleep in the truck. I never did more'n half believe him, even before I found out about that tricky little wench he's been running around with."

"Another girl?"

"That ratty Georgie Carr!"

ALICE stuck out her pudgy chin, her eyes flashed. "I guess he met her at the bowling alleys. I s'pose she used to go there with her brother—Sam Carr was on the Shipping Department team with Lyle.

"First thing I know some friends of mine see him out dancing with her at *The Chick Inn*. Then somebody tells me he's been taking her to the picture show at Music Hall. He thought he was getting away with it because I never let on I knew about him cheating on me."

"How long's this two-timing been going on?"

"Couple of months or so. Mind you, all the time he's been taking her out to ritzy restaurants and seeing shows and spending all kinds of money on her he's been getting stingier every week about the money he gives me to run the house.

"Why, there isn't even enough coal in

the cellar to keep the furnace going right this minute! But of course that don't bother *him*—gallivanting around with a floozie, pinching sables from the store he works for."

"No." Marko felt sort of sorry for this unattractive woman. "But if the police get their hands on him they'll make it hot enough for him. Could I see his room, his clothes?"

"He didn't take any suits with him or shirts or ties—if that's what you mean." She seemed resentful. "But if you want to look around . . ." She led the way up narrow stairs, to a bedroom.

A big double bed, a bureau with perfume bottles, cosmetics, silver-backed toilet accessories—a man's chiffonier with military brushes, handkerchief box, a packet of cigarettes. On the bureau a photograph of Lyle Burger in uniform, looking out of a silver frame. On the chiffonier a portrait of Mrs. Burger in a wedding dress.

She went to the closet door, threw it open. "He always spent plenty of money on *his* things, you can see that."

There were four suits that bore the tailoring marks of Nimblett's Men's Shop, a good cashmeré topcoat, three pairs of shoes, a rack of gaudy ties. But what Marko looked at was a slender strand of brown that lay sinuously across the sill of the closet.

He asked, "Could I see his suitcase?"

When she stooped to pull the luggage out from beneath the bed, he picked up the wet slippery strand, slid it into his pocket.

* * * * *

The man in the phone booth stood facing the glass panels in the folding door so he could see anyone approaching the booth. Also he could see his own reflection in the finger-smudged glass. As he listened a single drop of sweat rolled swiftly down to the tip of his nose, hung there trembling like a glass bead.

"I know," he said to the mouthpiece. "I realize fully the need for haste. But I can't turn those—ah—items into cash

quickly, I simply cannot. Under the—um—circumstances, it would be most unwise to—to put them on the market at all for awhile. Yes, I will do my best. Possibly I can arrange an advance of some sort. I'll do my best and let you know."

He listened to the earpiece a moment. Then, "No, no. You can't call me back. I'm not in my office. I'm using a pay phone, you understand. I'll get in touch with you as soon as—oh, no! no! I wouldn't do anything like that. You certainly know me better than *that!* Yes—ah—goodbye."

He racked the receiver with the slow precision of a mechanical man. He was staring at his reflection in the dirty glass. It was frightening to realize that furrowed forehead, those quivering lips were his.

He wiped his face carefully, took time to light a cigarette and compose his features before he quit the booth.

CHAPTER IV

HOMECOMING



THE shipping room was shadowy, lit only by the goose-neck on Pat Rellt's high book-keeping desk. Marko leaned against the desk.

"I was at Carr's when I called you. Had a run-in with some gent who didn't like me prowling the premises. I didn't get a good look at him but he took a good sock at me. If it was Carr he didn't hang around after.

"The No. Eight truck had been there, was emptied there, all the stuff taken out of the parcels. Mrs. Burger says her husband's been playing kneesie with Sam Carr's sister. That's all I know. What do you know?"

Rellt's red neck swelled like a turkey cock. "Sam's been off his feed a lot lately. I laid it to his being keyed up about them package thefts like the rest of us. Sure sounds screwey, his being

took with one of his spells just the afternoon you go out to nose around his place.

"But if there's one crooked bone in Sam Carr's body you can have my chances of a pension. He ain't no ball of fire but he's never pulled anything out of line since I known him an' that's quite a few years."

"He's got a good boss anyway." Marko hooked a friendly left to Rellt's short ribs. "You'd better call it a week, Pat. It's half-past six. The store'll still be here Monday morning."

"They might get word of that truck," the Irishman shook his head. "I'm gettin' sandwiches in just in case we do hear."

"Don't hold your breath till then." Marko took the freight elevator to the third. The floor was deserted except for the cleaning crew. Alice Stein sat at the receptionist's desk in front of the Personnel Office, fussing with her sleek coppery hair.

"Hi! Mister Zilberkeit's about ready to pop a valve. He had a dinner engagement at six. He's pretty steamed up about not making it."

"Sorry about that. You get anything?"

"I don't know. I had Personnel call his secretary away on the grounds of checking her social security card or something. Took me half an hour to go through his desk; there wasn't anything out of the way that I could see—except he keeps a bottle of bourbon in his lower right-hand drawer to guard against germs."

"Against rules. But pardonable."

"Sure is. It's bonded. I sampled it. Anyhow, while I was in there, somebody called him on the phone. I answered. The person at the other end was Felix Rachno of Rachno Brothers. You know, the big—"

"Yair." Rachno was almost as important in the fur business as Revillon Freres. "Well?"

"When I told him Mister Zilberkeit was tied up for a while but I'd take a

message he got cagey. 'Mister Zilberkeit wanted me to get on the track of a certain party for him. So if you'd just mention the Vanity Fur Fair to him, probably they'd be the kind of people he had in mind!"

"What is it, an auction setup?"

"Just a retail house. Fordham Road, the Bronx. I looked 'em up. Not much credit rating—C-three. But I didn't want to ask around too much, rouse any suspicions. I wouldn't have thought there was anything queer about it except Rachno seemed so kind of cautious about mentioning it."

"Good girl."

"What happened to you?" She frowned at his swollen ear.

"I was listening at the wrong key-hole. Go on and do your homework. Thanks. See you Monday." He went into his office.

A tall gaunt individual with bushy black eyebrows overhanging a long bony face scowled at him with impatience. "I'm as much interested in recovering these sables as you are, Marko. But you realize I have other obligations as well. My time—"

"—is valuable. Sure. Won't keep you long. Were you on the floor when His Royal Highness came in to make his selection yesterday?"

"I handled the entire transaction myself." Zilberkeit looked smug. "I think I may say that no one else in the department is quite as well equipped to discuss blue sables as—"

"Natch. What I'm getting at, did you happen to notice any other customer, not in the Gaekwar's party, who stuck around while the old boy made his purchase?"

ZILBERKEIT pursed his mouth. "Odd you should ask that. I've been thinking about it, myself. Yes, there was—a short fellow, paunchy type. Around forty or so. Very well dressed. Very prosperous looking. What you'd call a red-apple complexion, I guess."

"Did he buy anything?"

"No. He just loitered around the Gaekwar's group until they decided on the sables, then he drifted away."

"First time you'd seen this gent?"

"Thinking back, it seems to me I may have seen the fellow before somewhere—but for the life of me I can't recall where."

"Could you identify him from a photo?"

"Easily."

Marko made apologies for delaying Zilberkeit, promised news of the sables shortly, got rid of the fur buyer.

He unlocked his safe cabinet, took out an S&W .38, checked the load, stuck it in his coat pocket. He'd never had occasion to use it in the store but with that little encounter at Carr's in mind it might be a handy gadget to have around. He locked up, went out.

At the precinct station, he talked to Lieutenant MacRollins. "Thing's beginning to crack open, Mac."

"You figuring on doing all the busting, leaving us to pick up the pieces?" The detective Lieutenant didn't go for that.

"Uh, uh. I'll cut you in for the big slice. All I want are a couple of crumbs—soon's I know who they are, I'll holler for help. Right now I want that girl."

"Who blames you, brother! She's the best-looking wench this hoosegow's housed in many a day."

They went into a cell block, reeking with antiseptic. Keys rattled, bolts shot loose. Georgia Carr huddled on a corner of the bunk.

The Lieutenant said: "Turning you loose in Mister Marko's custody, miss."

"Please," she pleaded. "I don't want to go!"

Marko said, "They can't keep you here unless I sign a complaint, Miss Carr. I'm not signing one, so—"

At the mention of her name, she stiffened. "If you're not detaining me I can go where I want to, can't I?"

Marko said, "You heard the Lieutenant say you're still in my custody." He led her out to his car, helped her in.

"Where are we going?"

He slid in beside her. "Greenlace Park."

She cringed. "You seem to know all about me."

"Just beginning to find out. You're going to tell me."

"I'm not, either! You can make me go where you want to but you can't make me talk!"

"Maybe you'll feel different about it after you've seen your brother."

She didn't rise to the bait at all. He asked her about Burger, got nowhere with that either. She sat rigidly silent all the way across the bridge, out the Boulevard.

It wasn't until they drove down Greenlace Lane that she spoke. The light Marko'd left burning was a bright beacon against the dark street.

"Sam's home!" she breathed.

Marko wasn't at all sure about that. But he didn't admit it to her. They went up the walk, onto the porch.

Georgia used her key, opened the door, flung herself back in panic, seized Marko's wrist with a gouging grip.

She gasped at the man sitting propped against the wall of the tiny vestibule with his head lolling over on one side and something that looked like a strip of red cellutape pasted across his forehead and down the side of his cheek.

Sam Carr was home.

CHAPTER V

SHUDDERS



ARKO pushed the girl out on the porch, bent to examine the body.

"He did it!" she moaned.

"He did it after all!"

Carr had been sitting with his back against the vestibule, leaning to his left, legs straight out. His head was tipped toward his shoulder so his pale eyes stared through thick glasses at the blue-barreled .32 automatic clenched in his right

hand. Marko didn't pretend to be an expert on firearms but the bullet-hole in the dead man's head looked as if it had been made with a .32.

"Why would your brother kill himself?"

Georgia seemed dazed. "I don't know."

He got sore. "What does have to happen to make you loosen up?"

She put the back of her hand over her eyes. "I've been afraid Sam would do this. He's been so depressed over the stealing at the store. Yesterday morning he was horribly blue. He hardly spoke to me at breakfast. Then, when Aunt Helen called to ask me over to her house for the weekend—and Sam became suddenly so anxious to have me go—I got more worried than ever about him."

"You weren't home last night?"

"No. My aunt lives in Northport. She works at Radio City. She asked me to meet her right after she got through last night and go home with her. I did though I was scared about Sam."

"I tried to call him on the phone last night but I couldn't get him. I put through a call again early this morning. Still there wasn't any answer. I had a premonition then he'd done something desperate. So I caught the ten o'clock bus, hurried straight here."

It dawned on Marko that Carr's body'd probably been right where it was now all the time Marko'd been talking to Pat Rellt on the phone. Marko'd searched the house but hadn't bothered to look out on the front porch, hadn't gone near the vestibule.

When he left, he'd used the back door. Certainly the corpse had been there quite awhile. The fingernails were turning purple, the face grayish. Blood had seeped through the thick fibre of the door-mat and dried.

"When I got here," Georgia said dully, "I found a miserable mess of paper and cartons and excelsior strewn all over our kitchen. I knew what that meant, of course. Sam hadn't expected me to come home until tomorrow night,

so he'd probably meant to clean up before I got back.

"It made me simply sick to realize he'd been mixed up in anything criminal like that, especially since I'd heard him making such a fuss about the package thieves who were stealing stuff right under his nose. I called a taxi, went right to the store, to Sam's checking stand where the trucks load."

"Go on." Marko weighed the possibility that the man whose body slumped there so wretchedly had been the man who'd slugged him—whose distorted grimace had showed in that mirror. Maybe the poor devil had figured he'd killed Marko—and in fear and remorse had come in here to the vestibule, shot himself.

Still, in that case, why had that kitchen window been jimmied? Why hadn't Carr simply stopped Marko from coming in the house at all, as he'd have had a right to?

"Sam was paralyzed with fear," she said, "when I told him what I'd seen.

But he didn't deny he'd had a hand in unwrapping those parcels. He just pleaded with me to go away, not to talk about it there on the platform, to hurry back home and wait for him."

Marko cocked his head. Somewhere in the house a door had closed softly. With the front door open a draught might have caused that—but he had to make sure.

"Wait." He brought out his gun, stalked into the hall.

SHE followed him. Marko held out an arm. "Stay on the porch."

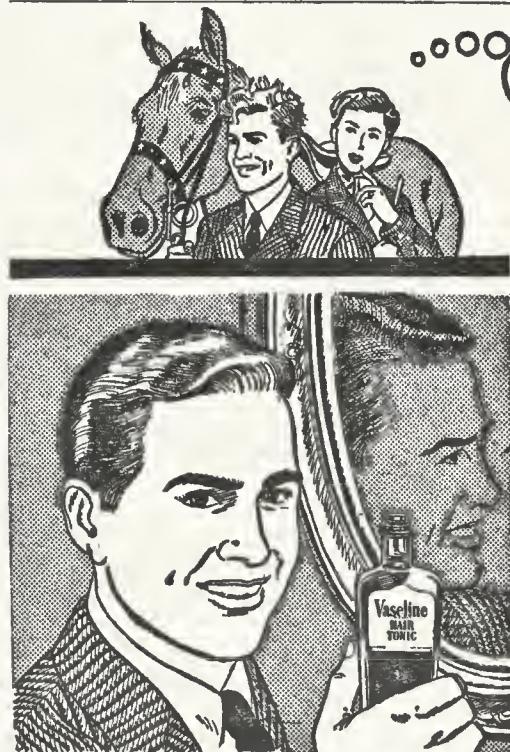
"I'm not afraid—not of anything now Sam's dead." There was no fear in her voice. "I don't care what happens to me now Sam's gone. My brother was all I had in the world."

"Well, keep behind me."

He went through the dining-room to the kitchen, switching on lights as he went.

Georgia kept talking. "I didn't want

[Turn page]



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to leave the store, being sure in my heart Sam was involved in something that would—take him away from me for a long while. I wouldn't have either if Freddy hadn't seen me talking to my brother and hurried over toward us."

"Freddy? Guy who gave you the silver fox?" Marko was concentrating on listening, half expecting the blast of a gun or the shock of a bullet any instant, from the darkness.

"I didn't want to tell you when you asked me in your office. His name's Freddy Wawsten but I never heard Sam or any of the other drivers call him anything but Freddy."

Marko clicked on the bedroom light. A suitcase lay open on the bed—shirts and underwear and socks tossed in it, helter-skelter.

That suitcase hadn't been on the bed when Marko'd gone through the house the other time. It could mean Carr had first intended to flee—then changed his mind and taken the quick way out of his troubles.

"Freddy's a truck driver?" He knew every one of Nimblett's nine hundred and more employees. The name of Wawsten rang no bell at all.

"Yes, of course. I met him first while I was modeling at Vanity Fur."

He was so startled he forgot about the possibility of someone hiding in a closet or behind a bed.

"You worked at Vanity Fur Fair!" Ring-around-a-rosie! Right back where he'd started from, Marko thought.

"Up to a couple of months ago. Does it make any difference?"

"It might." Marko ran his finger along the side of the suitcase, inspected his fingertip sombrely.

Everything tied in with the last two months—the epidemic of package thefts, Sam Carr's promotion and his recent dizzy spells—now this kid's quitting her job with the outfit Zilberkeit had been so guardedly interested in.

"You know this Freddy pretty well?"

"I went to a few dances with him. He brought me home afterwards, met Sam.

He kept coming around. My brother seemed to like him, at first anyway. For the last week I've had the feeling Sam's been afraid of him."

"What's Freddy look like?"

"Medium height, sort of stocky. Around twenty-six or seven, I'd say. Snub nose, sandy hair, blue eyes. Nice teeth—" she hesitated.

Marko reflected sourly that such a description would fit a hundred thousand men here in Queens County. It wouldn't be far wrong if she'd tried to describe Lyle Burger. "I asked you if you knew Burger. Ever hear your brother mention a driver by that name?"

"No—never."

"Well, what'd Freddy do when he saw you talking to your brother?" He steered her out of the bedroom, back to the living-room.

THE girl trembled—he could feel her shudder as he held her arm.

"He stuck his face right up to mine—told me to beat it before I got into trouble. I must have become hysterical. I remember screaming 'Trouble' back at him. Then he grabbed me, using the most awful obscenities—and shook me until my teeth chattered.

"He kept swearing and telling me if I didn't keep my damn mouth shut he'd shut it for me for keeps. Of course it gave me cold shivers—the way he said it and the way he looked at me. I'd never heard him use nasty language like that before. I could see he was in a killing rage and meant every word."

"So then?" Marko went to the phone, began to dial.

"Naturally I supposed Sam would step in to protect me, so I stood my ground and flared back at Freddy that I'd say just exactly what I thought was right and if he was mixed up in package stealing too it was just too bad."

Georgia went drearily to the coffee table, began mechanically to pick bits of the broken cigarette box off the carpet. "But Sam didn't interfere! He

looked simply scared out of his mind, kept begging me to go away before I made things worse.

"And Freddy! He whipped out a pocket knife, pressed a spring or something—and a long blade jumped at me. That was when I ran—when I realized he really did mean to kill me! I ran out of the shipping bay. Freddy followed me to the sidewalk. I thought he was still chasing me when I tore around to the Fifth Avenue corner into the store but I couldn't swear to it, now."

To the phone Marko said, "Lieutenant MacRollins?" And to Georgia, "Why didn't you run to the nearest cop?"

"Because of Sam." She seemed surprised he didn't understand. "I was mortally afraid of Freddy. If you'd seen that ugly glint in his eye when he opened the knife you'd have been terrified too. But I didn't want to do anything to prevent Sam's having time to escape.

"Since I didn't dare to have Freddy arrested I thought of getting *myself* arrested. Only way I knew of doing that was to steal something. I'd seen often enough how the police treated shoplifters when I was modeling for Mister Doriandi—"

Marko got his man on the line. "Mac? Don Marko. I know it's out of your district but there's a little matter of homicide I can turn over to you. One of the pieces that busted off that package theft case."

"Where are you?"

"Well. The corpus is at eighty-one Greenlace Lane—know where Greenlace Park is?"

"Sure. Who is it?"

"Sam Carr, the head checker in our shipping department."

"Murder?"

"Wouldn't know—that's your department. I'm after those blue sables. But Carr seems to have been mixed up with that missing truck of ours."

"Yeah? You know the truck's been found?"

"No. Where?"

"State troopers found it. Hour or so ago. Sunk in twenty feet of water in Hempstead Harbor."

"No kidding!"

"Vehicle was empty except for the driver. He was drowned at the wheel when the truck missed a curve and ran off the road into the Sound."

CHAPTER VI

GATE CRASH

FINGERING the puffed-up lobe of his right ear, Marko dropped the phone back in its cradle. He'd broken the connection, cut Mac off in the middle of a sentence—a thing detective lieutenants weren't used to and couldn't be expected to like much.

But Marko's ear hurt. It kept reminding him of that evil minute he'd suffered here in the Carr's living-room. He meant to do something about that himself without benefit of police.

MacRollins would suppose the Store Protection Chief would be at the scene of the homicide, would wait for the arrival of the squad car with its sergeant-stenographer, its photographer and fingerprint specialists. But if Marko waited for the Blues to arrive he'd get involved in a quiz session which might not be too pleasant in view of the fact he must have been in the house about the time Carr died.

More important he'd miss the chance to give the Vanity Fur Fair the once-over—those Fordham Road shops stayed open on Saturday night but not too late. It was after eight already.

He had qualms about taking the girl with him. She wouldn't want to leave her brother's body there in the vestibule. But Marko might need her.

She made no objection when he asked her to come along—he had the feeling she'd spoken the exact truth when she'd said nothing mattered to her any more.

But plenty of things mattered to Mar-

ko. The place the No. 8 truck had been found—it was on the route to or from Northport—where Georgia had been last night. The dead truck driver—MacRollins had said a wallet had been found in the man's pocket, identifying him as Lyle Burger.

But had Burger been masquerading as Freddy Wawsten? Mrs. Burger had been emphatic enough about Georgia's running around with her husband. The description of Freddy could go as well for Burger. Why Sam Carr should have aided a deception like that, especially where his own sister was concerned—that was tough to figure. Marko could think of but one explanation that made sense.

He asked Georgia if Freddy'd ever driven to the Carr home in his truck. She gave him a blank stare of bafflement—and a definite no.

Inquiries about the Vanity Fur Fair and its proprietor, Jacques Doriandi, returned scarcely more than the monosyllable. The store was large, very prosperous, handled mostly inexpensive coats, imitation furs. Did much of its business the credit-payment way.

Doriandi was all right to work for. He made the usual passes at all models but didn't fire you if you turned down his dinner invitations. He paid poorly but allowed large discounts to employees who wanted to buy furs themselves. That was about all she knew—or would say.

WHEN he parked around the corner from the glare of the Vanity Fur Fair's immense floodlighted sign—which could be seen for a mile down the Grand Concourse—he told her to sit tight in the car until he came for her.

"What are you going to do in there?" she wanted to know.

"Look around." At the corner he stepped unobtrusively into an intervening theatre lobby to avoid the tall gaunt person who strode out of the Fur Fair, swung briskly down the block in the opposite direction—Zilberkeit!

Marko waited until the buyer was swallowed up in the crowd, went in the glass-and-black-marble store entrance. The display windows were blinding with garish incandescence but the interior of the store was lit by a subdued glow from the ceiling. It would be harder to spot imperfections in the furs in such patrician dimness, Marko thought.

There were a dozen customers—the women busy at coat racks, their men lounging with unaccustomed elegance in deep overupholstered chairs. There were four salesgirls—sleek, hard-eyed, arch-backed, with a manner of scorning anyone who thought of buying less than mink.

A stout hippy woman with an appraising glance and a thin shrewd mouth came to greet Marko. He mumbled something about a girl, a gift, a fur neckpiece. She turned him over to one of the brittle-mannered salesgirls.

He let her high-pressure him for a while, appeared to be dissatisfied with the foxes and the caracul she was showing him.

"Haven't you something better?" he asked. "I wouldn't mind spending a little more dough if I could get something really super."

"Just a moment, sir. I'll see if Mister Doriandi has anything to suggest." She went away behind gold-velvet drapes that hung from ceiling to floor.

She was gone only a moment. When she emerged again, parting the heavy draperies as if she were making a stage entrance, she held them aside for a short paunchy individual with bulging brown eyes, smooth, brown hair, rosy cheeks.

Marko thought Zilberkeit's description suited the man precisely.

"Mister Doriandi." The salesgirl gestured as a master of ceremonies does, introducing the star of the show. "The gentleman is interested in something a little out of the ordinary, Mister Doriandi." She went away.

"Did you have any special—ah—variety of fur in mind, sir?" The chubby

cheeks made a smile.

Marko's nerves tingled. There couldn't be two men who had suave oily hesitant inflections like that. This was the Joe who'd tried to get Marko to release Georgia Carr!

"Well, I don't know." He kept his own voice flat, toneless. "Ermine maybe—or sable."

Doriandi's smile froze. The protruding eyes became wary. "Ermine is not—ah—a preferred pelt for neckpieces this season. As to sable, good skins are extremely difficult to obtain."

Marko wondered whether his voice had been recognized. "How much would you nick me for a top-grade sable?"

"Such a fur at the moment I don't have in stock, sir. A really fine Russian blue—anywhere up to five thousand dollars."

"Oh, hell." Marko flapped a derisive palm. "I hit the jackpot this week so I planned to buy a present my girl wouldn't forget in a hurry. But I wouldn't spend more than a couple of thousand at the outside."

Greed struggled with caution in the furrier's face. "Possibly Monday—ah—if you'd bring the young lady around. I may be able to—to get hold of something which will suit you."

"Don't have to wait till Monday," Marko grinned. "Got her right out in my car now. I'll bring her in."

As he strode out to the car Marko wondered whether the man would actually have attempted to sell a hot fur which would be headline news in every metropolitan paper tomorrow morning.

All thought of furs left his mind abruptly when he rounded the corner, saw his car.

The girl was gone.

ON THE curbstone beside the front seat a gilt spark shone in the stuttering neons of the movie theatre—the five-and-dime lipstick.

Somebody'd come up beside the car while she was fixing her lips, had made her leave or got her to leave. There

was no other indication of a struggle.

Marko considered the possibility that he was letting his sympathies throw him off the track. Georgia might merely have been waiting for the chance to run out on him. When it came right down to it he had no actual proof she hadn't shot Sam Carr herself, put that pistol in his hand to make it look like a self-exit.

No—that left too many angles unaccounted for.

The stout florist paid no attention as he hurried past the customers, preening in rabbit and muskrat dyed to look like seal and mink. She didn't even glance in his direction as he reached the golden curtain at the far end of the store.

But the salesgirl who'd attended him called sharply, "Sir! That's private!"

He went through without replying, without slowing. Behind the long curtain was a corridor full of packing boxes, portable coat racks, display fixtures. A door marked WOMEN—another half-open so he could see a steno desk and green files—and at the very rear one lettered J. DORIANDI, PRES.

He didn't knock. Doriandi had his back to the door, stood before a giant black safe. He spun around quickly, pushing the safe door closed, so all Marko could catch was a glimpse of plastic garment bags hanging from a bar inside the safe.

The man's face lost its florid coloring. His eyes bugged until they seemed ready to pop out of their sockets. "If you don't mind waiting—ah—out in the salesroom a few minutes? I have other business."

"Say you have." Marko closed the door behind him, found the key, turned it. "I won't wait more'n a minute either. If you haven't told me by that time what's happened to Georgia Carr I'll give you a workout you'll remember the rest of your life."

"I don't understand, sir!"

"Hell you don't." Marko closed in as Doriandi retreated toward the safe. He

grabbed the furrier's polished hair, jerked the man's head back so his chin pointed to the ceiling and his crown banged against the safe.

"Not going to horse with you, Doriandi." He yanked the hair so the furrier came up on his toes, squealing. "And if you can use a phone after I'm through with you you're welcome to call the cops. I'll take my chances with them. I can say you tried to bribe me this afternoon at Nimblett's, which is true. How you'll come out after they've inspected the stuff you've got in your little iron wardrobe there—"

"I know nothing—ah—about Miss Carr—!"

"So! She worked for you. You know she met a truckman named Freddy Wawsten here. You know him—you had to know he tried to scare her silly to keep her from spilling the beans about those stolen sables because you tried to get her out of my hands into his."

"Let go—let go!" The furrier wailed. Tears drooled down the fat cheeks.

"What you might not know"—loose hair came away in Marko's fingers as he released Doriandi—"is that two men are ready for a ride in that long black buggy as a result of this thing. Whether those deaths were accidental or suicidal or murder is anybody's guess. Mine is that somebody's likely to take a slow burn in a big chair before this is over. But if I don't find out where that girl is you won't have to fret yourself about that!"

The fur man clasped his hands on top of his head. "Freddy?" he whimpered. "I haven't seen Freddy."

Marko moved swiftly. Before he could wind his fingers in Doriandi's hair again the paunchy man fell to his knees, scrabbled to a small table, snatched at a drawer. Marko kicked like a fullback punting from behind his goal. His foot caught the drawer squarely, slammed it shut, squeezing the fingers with which the furrier was gripping a nickeled hammerless.

Doriandi shrieked, put his fingers in his mouth.

OUT in the hall, fists hammered on the door.

"Tell 'em to call an ambulance," Marko said grimly. "You'll need one." He retrieved the shiny pistol, stuck it in his topcoat. Then he got a good two-handed grip on Doriandi's topknot, hauled the man to his feet, chuttering with pain.

"I tell you—I haven't seen Freddy tonight—or Miss Carr."

"Know where you can find him, don't you?"

"He lives at—"

"Where is he now? Where'd he have taken her."

Excited voices in the corridor cried, "Mister Doriandi, Mister Doriandi—we phoned the police. They'll be here in a minute."

The furrier wilted. "The Jiffy Garage, maybe. It's at—"

"Don't bother telling me. Drive me there." Marko unlocked the door.

The floolady, with two of her sales-girls, ran up the hall toward the front of the store. "Help! Thief! Police!" they screeched.

Doriandi howled, "No, no, no, NO! Stop that noise." They huddled against the wall, uncertainly.

Marko said, "Back way somewhere?"

"There." Doriandi pointed. He was frantic to get out before the police came in. He led the way through the stenographic office to a door opening on an alley. Sirens wailed wildly as Marko marched the fur man to the car.

He made Doriandi drive, sat beside him with the .38 in his fist. He'd take no more chances. The one he'd taken in bringing Georgia here hadn't turned out so well. If it hadn't been for him she'd be safe behind bars right now.

Doriandi drove down the Grand Concourse, over the Triboro toward Long Island City. He dribbled a thin trickle of information as he drove.

As Marko had figured, Freddy Wawsten wasn't a Nimblett driver at all. He

worked for a parcel delivery service, the Jiffy Jeeps. A small outfit, only in business six months or so—they serviced manufacturers and wholesalers who had no trucks of their own, made deliveries of merchandise to stores.

He'd get around to the Vanity Fur Fair every other day or so—probably made deliveries to Nimblett's even oftener. He would run his truck right up to a store's shipping platform since once in awhile he'd have to take back some goods being returned.

But Doriandi pleaded ignorance of any parcel thefts. Freddy'd never offered hot merchandise to him—no indeed. A man of Jacques Doriandi's reputation? Thirty years in fur retailing? Incredible to suppose he might have had anything to do with such dishonest offers even if they *had* been made!

As for the two dead men Doriandi insisted he knew neither of them. He'd talked to Marko about letting Georgia go, yes—but that was because Freddy had phoned him, asked him to do so. Freddy had simply said the girl had got herself into a jam. He wanted to help her out of it but he couldn't do it himself. Nobody'd have paid any attention if he'd gone to the Store Protection Office in his driver's uniform.

The car rolled through deserted streets lined with factories, warehouses, junk yards, freight cars on sidings, garages. Before a high wooden fence Doriandi slowed. At a pair of wide swinging doors, he stopped.

Yellow lettering on the doors proclaimed *JIFFY JEEPS—Quick Pickups for Jobbers & Wholesalers.*

Fifty feet behind the fence a rusty sheet-iron structure loomed against the night skyline.

"You see," Doriandi said, "it's all dark. All the trucks would be in by now and—ah—there's nobody here."

Marko got out. No lights showed in the building. The gate was locked. A bell centered in a circle of yellow paint had a cardboard sign tacked over it—

Ring Bell for Nightman. He thumbed it, was surprised at the loudness of its clangor through the empty street. Nothing stirred.

He climbed on the fender of his car, stood on the running board, peered over the fence.

Close inside the gate, a dark silhouette was outlined against the lighter gray of gravel. The silhouette moved—the figure of a man who was stooping to look between the cracks of the swinging gates.

Marko stepped down quietly. "Hey!" he shouted. "Anybody around?"

No answer. He went to the driver's side, pushed Doriandi away from the wheel. "No soap," he said with loud disappointment. "Let's go."

He got under the wheel, backed the car up the street a hundred feet, pulled out of reverse, gave her the gas. The car gained speed.

He swung in a wide half-arc across the street. At the Jiffy Jeep entrance he wheeled straight in toward the doors without braking.

The bumper crashed against the wooden gates, burst them open, sent them splintering. Caught in Marko's headlights, a man in driver's breeches and puttees picked himself off the gravel where the gate had thrown him, scuttled into the shadows!

CHAPTER VII

SHADOW MAN



E CUT the ignition, braked hard. Before the car stopped rolling he had his door open, was hauling Doriandi out beneath the steering wheel.

The furrier opened his mouth to protest. Marko swung a roundhouse right, snapped the chubby man's head back on his shoulders. Doriandi grunted, sagged against the open car door. Marko hooked him hard twice, on the back of the neck, as Doriandi slipped to the

dirt, sprawled on his face.

Maybe rabbit punches weren't sporting—but Marko couldn't afford to have those bulging eyes measuring him from behind. The job ahead was dangerous enough without that. He left the furrier where he'd dropped.

The headlights cut a broad swath through the gloom of the yard but there were dark corners and deep shadows on both sides. The driver had scurried to the right behind a parked panel-jeep. Marko dodged to the right too—out of the glare—edged along a board fence.

He dropped to his knees, peering beneath the jeep. No legs showed against the light. Gravel crunched stealthily a few yards nearer the building. Marko slipped off his shoes, moved catlike toward the sound.

A tug hooted hoarsely off in the river behind the low shed. Marko crept alongside a huge ten-wheel trailer bulking monstrously against the night glow. The harsh exhalation of a panting man became faintly audible, came nearer. Marko held his S&W by the barrel, clubbing it.

Motionless, hardly breathing, he waited while the strained breathing grew a little louder. The driver was sneaking around the trailer, heading for the street.

A shadow expanded at the corner of the trailer, became a head poking cautiously around. The man turned his head slightly toward the faint illumination spilling out into the yard.

The blood hammered at Marko's temples. He couldn't see the driver clearly but the vague light showed just enough of the eyes and the white teeth in the grimacing mouth. This was the frightened face he had seen in the mirror at Carr's—the man who had slugged him so unmercifully.

Marko sprang, swinging the gun.

The driver cursed, lashed out with a tire iron. It caught Marko in the mouth, cut his lips, loosened his teeth. He grabbed the jacket of the uniform. The driver wrenched away. The jacket

ripped. Marko brought the gun butt down again. The other clinched, used a knee where it hurt.

Teeth fastened in Marko's bruised ear. He butted the driver in the face, found the man's throat with his fingers, held on while the knee pounded at his groin with nauseating agony.

The man made one final effort, in a choking paroxysm, to claw Marko's eyes. Then his fingers relaxed. He was a dead weight in Marko's hands.

Marko took a long minute to get his breath, recover from the nausea that retched him, inspect his lacerated ear, wipe his bleeding mouth. Then he dragged the unconscious man by the collar, across the yard into the light, went through the driver's pockets.

THIS was Freddy, all right. The Citizens Commercial book—showing deposits of \$420 three weeks ago, \$675 ten days ago, \$485 last week—was made out to *A. Frederic Wawsten Jr.* There was a bunch of keys on a keyring—one key, much used, loose in the pants pocket.

Doriandi rolled over on his back as Marko finished the frisking. The Store Protection Chief went to the car, prodded the plump paunch with the muzzle of his pistol.

"Up on your feet, mister. Work to do."

Doriandi pawed at his jaw, staggered to his feet, uttered only the feeblest protest when Marko told him to haul Wawsten over to the sheet-iron building. The furrier wheezed and groaned, did as ordered.

The loose key fitted neatly into a lock set into a door made of corrugated metal. Marko opened it, found a switch that snapped on a single hundred-watt bulb suspended from the ceiling of a cubbyhole office partitioned off from a garage and repair shop.

On the roll-top desk, standing against the partition, was a girl's handbag.

"Set him in that swivel-chair," he told Doriandi. "Take off his belt! Strap

his hands behind his back—through the back of the chair. Yair—that's it."

While the furrier was trussing Freddy up, Houdini fashion, Marko looked in the knee-hole beneath the roll-top. Georgia was crammed in there, roped hand and foot, with her own gloves for a gag.

He pulled her out, cut the ropes, untied the cord holding the gloves in her mouth.

She gasped, "He was going to kill me! I told you he was!"

"Well, you were right about him. Bad actor, sure. But about murder—I don't know. He had a chance to knock me off earlier today—and didn't. Doubt if he killed Burger or your brother."

"Sam—murdered?"

"Have to wait for an autopsy to be certain. But I'd say he wasn't the sort to take that kind of a short cut."

No need of going into his reasons—that people who wore glasses always took them off before they did the dutch—that the dust-covered suitcase with the carelessly tossed-in clothing wasn't much like the neat tidy Sam Carr.

"But we'll know for sure here in a little while."

Freddy made a queer rasping noise deep in his throat, opened his eyes, glared wildly around at Marko, Doriandi, the girl.

"That's right," Marko said. "Game's over. You know the score. Better take it as you find it or you won't like the hard way." He reached for the phone on the roll-top.

"Jacques!" Freddy said through his teeth. "You double-crossing—"

"Shut up." Marko silenced him. "When I get this number you're going to tell your boss to hustle over here, but quick. You've got your tail in a crack and you need help. You won't be lying either."

"No." Freddy wagged his head.

"Yair." Marko finished dialing, held the receiver up to the driver's mouth. "You'll say just what I told you—or you'll spend a bad couple of hours find-

ing out what the boys in the back room will have to say about it over at the police station."

The buzz-buzz-buzz of the signal sounded loudly in the tiny office.

A mocking voice from the door said, "Was somebody ringing me? *Don't move!* This trigger I got hold of pumps six slugs per second—and I couldn't miss at ten feet!"

CHAPTER VIII

OFF THE RECORD



IT WAS Mrs. Burger. She pushed the office door wide open so she'd have plenty of room to swing the stubby nose of the tommy-gun.

Marko laid his pistol on the roll-top without waiting to be commanded. He recognized murder when saw it watching him over the muzzle. Georgia stared frozen-faced at the stout woman with the petulant mouth.

Freddy stammered hoarsely, "Jeeze! How did you get here, Stella?"

She smiled blandly. "Drove down—from Vanity. I was right about you after all, Jacques!"

"No, no!" the furrier gulped nervously. "You were not—"

"You're so used to tricky deals you finally double-crossed yourself, Jacques." Her tone was casual, as if she'd been discussing a cake recipe. "When th' girls at the Fair told me you'd gone out with this store dick, sneakin' out the back way, I knew you'd gone yellow on me."

Freddy bobbed his head: "That's right, Stella. He must have told this store sleuth because the gumshoe knew your phone number."

Doriandi held up both palms. "You don't understand."

She chuckled. "Don't I just! With Freddy in the clink and the cops looking for me—who'd have those blue sables to cash in on—with no split to anybody?"

After I did all the headwork, framing Sam Carr so the deal would click, too."

Freddy growled, "After I run all the risk, drivin' Lyle's cart when you decoyed him in Fifty-third Street, Stella! Don't forget that!"

"I won't, honey," she promised pleasantly. "I'll have it carved on your head-stone."

"Stell!" Freddy struggled with his hands. The frightened look came back in his face. "Make 'em untie me!"

"Why?" she asked. "Ain't it as easy to take it sittin' down?"

Freddy swallowed hard but couldn't use his voice. What she meant was what he'd been afraid of—the shadow of death was ominously close in that brightly-lighted little room.

Doriandi cried out shrilly, "You wouldn't do it! You really wouldn't!"

The muzzle of the tommy-gun came around to point at his navel. "I'll save you for last, Jacques—so you can see how the others take it. You're entitled to that on account of spilling the whole bag of beans."

Marko slapped the desk with the flat of his palm. Everyone jumped, except Mrs. Burger. He said tightly, "I don't know that it makes much difference, the way things stand—but Doriandi didn't tip me off about you, Mrs. Burger. He didn't have to. We didn't even bring up your name."

The stout woman wasn't impressed. "You're a liar. How could you have known about me?"

"I don't take any particular credit for being suspicious of you." Marko weighed the gamble of jumping her. It really wasn't any gamble at all—before he could possibly get across to her the submachine-gun could wipe out every living soul in the room.

"When I was talking to you about your husband you mentioned how funny it was he should skip out just when a lot of sables had been stolen. Nobody except the thieves knew about those sables being missing, except a few top people at Nimblett's—Herb Zilberkeit,

Pat Rellt, the front office. You claimed you hadn't seen your husband since yesterday morning—so he couldn't have told you about 'em."

SHE shook her head in frank admiration. "See how dumb I am? I put you down for a pussyfoot—fronting for the management. When all the time you got a brain in your head. But as long as you didn't have any microphone along with you—nobody outside this room will ever know how smart you were."

He decided he'd have to take the gamble anyway—knowing in advance he'd lose. There was a slight chance that if he made his rush boldly enough Mrs. Burger would hold the T-gun on him long enough to give Georgia a break—maybe even let her get away. He owed her that much for dragging her into this.

He saw Doriandi slide an inch or two toward Mrs. Burger. If the furrier had any desperate measures in mind Marko wouldn't interfere. He'd postpone his last-ditching as long as possible.

"Well. It wasn't only that remark." He spoke testily as if annoyed at her self-assurance. "Your house was well fixed up—you looked well-fed. There wasn't any indication you were so short of money you couldn't buy coal to heat your house.

"But that's what you claimed. You made such a point of it I wondered if possibly the reason was you'd been away somewhere all night, all that morning—and had let the furnace go out."

Mrs. Burger sighed. "I'll have that cut on *your* stone—I was a Wise Guy, See what it got me."

"Then there was that piece of seaweed, still wet, on your husband's closet floor." Marko had been right. Doriandi was a foot closer to the woman. The fur man wasn't going to be riddled without making a try for his life.

"If Lyle hadn't been home he couldn't have dropped the seaweed there. And you'd claimed you hadn't stirred out of

the house all day. Naturally I wondered."

That got under Mrs. Burger's skin. "You wondered this—you wondered that! Maybe the papers'll call you Wonder Boy, when they run your obituary."

"I suppose"—he decided he might as well hazard the shock of a slug now, if he could keep her attention riveted on him while Doriandi made his play. "I suppose you got that out in the Sound when you ran your husband's truck off the road into the water—"

"All right," the woman's eyes were ugly, "all right. I'll shut you up first!"

"I expect," he snapped at her, "the cops will be able to prove you murdered your husband. They might have a little more trouble proving you went over to Sam Carr's after Doriandi couldn't get Sam's sister released—and being afraid of what she'd told him, you put a bullet from his own gun in his brain and left the gun in his hand.

"That business of getting his suitcase out, throwing it on his bed—you'd never have thought of that to make it look as if he'd been planning to beat it unless I'd given you the idea when I was over at your house asking about your husband's clothes."

Georgia cried, "*She killed my brother?*" She came away from the wall where she'd been crouching, her eyes blazing.

The tommy-gun swung around toward her. Doriandi made a grab for the woman.

Mrs. Burger said "Ahmm!" swiveled the barrel around swiftly, pressed the trigger.

Noise hammered against the walls. Doriandi screeched, snatched at the sub-machine-gun's barrel, knocked it aside, plunged forward, dead on his feet.

Marko dived, pushed the swivel chair with Freddy so it rolled into the stout woman. She jerked the T-gun away from Doriandi. The top of Freddy's head came apart as if he'd been a doll stuffed with gray oatmeal.

Marko dived like a tackle blocking a

punt, arms upflung to smother the gun.

He caught the barrel, wrenched it down and away, brought it up against Mrs. Burger's double chin with a crack like a convict's sledge hitting a rock.

THEY were waiting for Lieutenant MacRollins. Georgia sat in the doorway, still crying from the after-effects of that murderous minute when the tommy-gun had spattered death and blood around the Jiffy Jeep office.

"I don't mean to say you shouldn't feel bad about your brother." Marko kept his eyes on the still crumpled heap of flesh that was Lyle Burger's widow. "But it might help to know he wasn't actually involved in any of the package thefts himself."

"It does help if it's true. Sam was always so swell—to me."

"Yair. Well." Marko let his eyes rove across to the bodies of Jacques Doriandi and A. Frederic Wawsten, Jr. "This charming lady," he touched Mrs. Burger with his stockinginged foot, "had Freddy scrape up an acquaintance with you.

"She and Freddy and Doriandi had done business together before, I suppose —she doing the masterminding, finding out when valuable parcels of furs were coming through some store's shipping room. Freddy doing the actual sleight-of-hand work of slipping the packages intended for some other driver in his own jeep and driving away before the mistake could be discovered or traced to him. Jacques selling the stolen pelts at retail—and all three splitting the proceeds.

"But Mrs. Burger didn't have any contacts at Nimblett's. Her husband worked there but he was never in cahoots with her, she didn't even trust him—and vice versa, I guess. But you had a brother working in the shipping room there, so they had Freddy honey up to you."

"Now I think of it he did seem more interested in cultivating Sam than in me," Georgia admitted sadly.

"Sure. Freddy got on such close terms with him that he dragged out inside information on valuable packages without your brother's even knowing it, probably. He could come right up to Sam's checking desk and note the little stars all head checkers put on especially important parcels. Then all he'd have to do was spot the packages with the corresponding names and addresses—and he'd know which ones to heist into his jeep."

"You don't believe Sam ever caught on?"

"Hard to say. If he did Freddy would have tried to laugh it off, denying he'd ever laid hands on any of the missing packages. If Sam became still more suspicious he'd have hesitated to do anything until he was absolutely certain Freddy was guilty. He wouldn't have wanted to do anything to hurt a particular friend of yours."

"But I told you that for the last week or so I had the feeling my brother was afraid of Freddy."

"Probably because finally he did accuse Wawsten. And then Freddy, acting on Mrs. Burger's orders, told your brother that if there were any disclosures Sam Carr would find himself in very hot water.

"Freddy would have threatened him by saying he'd claim Sam had tipped him off to the fur parcels—might even have split with him. Maybe there was even some talk of planting stuff in your house. It's likely that's what they had in mind when they ran Burger's truck around there and dumped all that wrapping paper around your kitchen.

"The hi-jacking of a whole truckload—and Burger's murder—probably were a result of Burger's being suspicious of his wife. She'd decided to put him out of the way to avoid trouble and grab off a whole truckload of stuff at the

same time, I expect.

"The blue sables, which Doriandi found out about while he was prowling our Fur Department, were the prize that tipped the scales and made them fix yesterday for the big job."

"The sables," she lifted her head as the scream of sirens began to sound steadily more loud in the night. "I'll never be able to look at a blue sable again without quivering all over. Or a silver fox neckpiece either."

"You don't want to feel that way about it." Marko saw the red blinker light racing nearer. "First place, the cops who went to Vanity Fur will have the sables by now. Second place, it wasn't your fault Freddy tried to get in your good graces by giving you a fur stolen out of Nimblett's. Third place—" he hesitated.

"What's third place, Mister Marko?" She turned to reach up and touch the arm in which he carefully cradled the T-gun.

"Well—third place, a nice girl who needs a job—who's had some experience as a fur model—could probably get one with Herb Zilberkeit in our store. He wouldn't hold it against her that she'd worked for a heel like Doriandi. He was on Doriandi's trail himself. But—a girl like that would have to look at sables and silver foxes quite a lot."

Georgia tried a wan smile. "Oh, looking at them that way would be different," she said. "But would Nimblett's have a girl who'd been a shoplifter?"

"I haven't any Georgia Carr on our records." He moved to the door as the patrol car swerved in the gates. "There was some dame named Betty Wheeler or something. But they let her go, you see. Extenuating circumstances, they called it." He glanced down at the corpses. "Plenty extenuating too if you ask me."

●
NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURED MYSTERY NOVELET

MURDER OF AN ORDINARY MAN by **WILLIAM DEGENHARD**

VOICE of the VIOLIN

The deed was brutal—and the accuser strange!

IT WAS the chiming of the big old clock in the second-floor hall outside his partly opened bedroom door that awakened Pohl. He had been sleeping lightly, just drifting, when he became dimly conscious of the booming, sonorous notes. Two o'clock.

The bedroom was hot this oppressive summer night and he was uncomfortable. Only half awake, he turned over, trying to drift off again. Dimly, his mind held the consciousness that something unpleasant, ominous, had happened to him. Then he remembered it—

Ventura staggered as the heavy little statue hit him in the chest



By RAY CUMMINGS

that quarrel he had had downstairs with old Luis Ventura just before he came up to bed. The memory of it revolved in his mind, bringing Pohl now to gradual wakefulness. The old man wouldn't give him the Amati violin. There wasn't a chance of it.

"You theenk I am jus' the old fool, eh, Robert?" Ventura had said. "The Amati I would gif you—for what? So you sell him, to waste the money on that girl!"

He had pried into Pohl's private affairs, knew about Gladys. Luis Ventura was a queer old fellow. Fifteen years ago he had adopted the ten-year-old Robert Pohl, hoping he could make the boy into a musician. "Now you are a man, Robert," Pohl remembered Ventura had said tonight. "You fool with the music just because I make you. And most time you hang around Broadway, spending my money on that girl. Bah! In the cheapest zarzuela a girl like that could not sing nor dance. Jus' what you call a tramp, eh?"

It had run into quite a quarrel. Then Pohl had walked out on the ranting old man, come upstairs and gone to bed. He lay now, at two o'clock, drowsily thinking of it. Then suddenly from downstairs, a thin thread of sound began drifting up. The music of a softly played violin.

Ventura evidently could not sleep, this steaming hot night. His bedroom and bath were down there, adjoining his studio in the big, old frame house. He was in the studio now, softly playing.

It was Chopin's "Raindrop Prelude."

AS THE sweet, plaintive little melody floated up, the gentle voice of the violin brought to the listening Pohl a sudden realization, so that he raised himself on one elbow, fully awake now, tense and startled. Ventura was playing the Amati!

Pohl had not known that the valuable instrument was here in the house. For over a year Ventura had been keeping it in the vault at the local bank. He must have gotten it this afternoon, brought it here, because he was going to present it to his favorite pupil, Gregoria Arnoni, when she came for her lesson tomorrow.

Pohl remembered what Ventura had said, during the quarrel:

"There is the real musician, Robert. She will work and work for her art. There is nothing else to her that matters in life." He had chuckled. "And tomorrow is her birthday, and she will be surprised at her reward!"

Moonlight shafted through Pohl's open window. He stared at the white curtains waving like ghostly wisps in the night-breeze. The music of the prelude welled a little louder. Of course it was the Amati; Pohl couldn't mistake it.

"A high-arch violin, Robert. More suitable for a girl. Not the force and fire of a Stradivarius. A voice gentle and sweet, almost timid." Ventura had often said that about it.

Now the soft strains of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" were floating in through Pohl's bedroom doorway. Tomorrow the Amati would be gone. Pohl's face was flushed. An excitement tingled in him. He had decided what he would do.

The hall clock chimed two-thirty. There was no sound from downstairs now, the old musician, playing his farewell on his treasured instrument, had evidently put it away and gone back to bed.

Robert Pohl got out of bed, put on his dressing gown and slippers. He was a slightly built, dark-haired youth, slack-jawed, with a thin handsome face that now was flushed and grimly tense.

Old Mrs. Peters, the housekeeper, and her moronic lout of a son, Timmy, were asleep up on the third floor. Quietly Pohl tiptoed to the stairs. The big rambling house, set here among the willows of the river bank, was hushed with silence.

Pohl listened, then he went back past his own bedroom to the rear stairs that led down to the kitchen.

The kitchen and lower hallway were pallid with moonlight. Pohl went into the studio. He could see that the door into Ventura's bedroom was closed. The big grand piano, its top littered with sheets of music, stood with ghostly shadows crowding it.

Quietly, Pohl searched. He found the small violin case, scuffed and battered

with age, behind a pile of music in one of the big cabinets. His hands shook as he took it out and opened it, disclosing the Amati.

Ventura had closed and locked the studio windows. With little noise Pohl opened one of them. Leaning out, he dropped the empty violin case into a garden shrub. He left the window open.

In the hallway, almost at the threshold of the studio doorway, was a loose board in the old-fashioned, rickety flooring. Pohl remembered how the old man had stumbled over it, had asked him to fix it. He hadn't; he had put a small rug over it.

Now, with the Amati beside him, Pohl removed the rug and pried up the board. Here the Amati could stay hidden for a time. Then Pohl knew just where he could quietly dispose of it—a man who would ask no questions, pay cash, and sell it abroad.

"So, I have a thief under my roof! You—you little viper!"

THE OLD musician's voice, a quivering tremolo of fury, sounded in the hush of the studio, so unexpected, so startling, that Pohl knelt transfixed.

Ventura was in his bedroom doorway, silhouetted by the yellow glow behind him—a slight and bent old figure in faded dressing gown. The light gleamed golden on his leonine mass of white hair, making his head seem grotesquely large. Just a shriveled old man, more than eighty now, but to Pohl the violence of his wrath made him monstrous.

"Jus' a thief in my house! That is the gratitude I get for what I have done! Now I know it!" He came striding into the dim studio. His thin, bare legs were white sticks under the short dressing gown. "I will show you!" He was heading for the telephone on a taboret by the piano. "A thief for the police to handle! A viper in my household!"

Spitting in his outraged anger, he was reaching for the telephone. No words would stop him, Pohl knew. Pohl had gasped something and scrambled to his feet, rushing into the room. He hardly knew he had seized the small bronze bust of Beethoven that rested on a pedestal by the door. Then he had flung it.

Ventura staggered as the small but heavy statue struck him in the chest. But he did not fall, he lunged forward.

To Pohl, it was a blurred horror. His mind held only terror at what he had done, and the greater fear that the old man would scream and arouse the house. He saw a big paper-knife, its silver glittering with a shaft of moonlight on it where it lay on a desk by the window.

Then he had seized it, meeting Ventura's tottering lunge, slashing down with the keen blade.

Ventura's scream was an eerie, senile cry that ended in a horrible rattling gurgle as the blade slid between his ribs. For another second he spun on crumpling legs, and then he fell.

Pohl staggered back, panting, engulfed with the terror of that scream. He tried to keep his wits about him. He snatched a table scarf, stooped and wiped the knife handle and the little statue.

Then he dashed to the hall.

The violin lay on the floor, beside the loose board which he had pried up. There was a foot or two of space underneath, going down to the top of the cellar beam. He put the violin there, carefully replaced the board and flung the small rug over it.

He could hear shouts upstairs, now. The housekeeper and her son were awake. He could hear them coming down. Timmy was calling, in another moment, from the second floor. Then he was starting down the front stairs, with his frightened mother behind him.

Like a shadow, Pohl moved back in the lower hall toward the kitchen. When he was certain that Timmy and his mother were well down the front stairs, he darted up the steep, back flight. He had closed his bedroom door. He flung it open now.

"Timmy, what is it?" he shouted. "What's the matter?"

Gaspings, he slammed down the front stairs so fast that he was in the front lower hall almost as soon as Mrs. Peters got there.

He gripped her.

"Somebody screamed! What was it?" Then his gasp mingled with a cry from Timmy, who had reached the study.

"The Maestro, he—he's been killed!"

POHL and the hysterical woman joined Timmy in the study. After a horrified moment, Pohl phoned the police. All three of them incoherent, they waited in the front hall for a moment.

It was then that Pohl happened to see his hands. Little smears of dried blood were on them. But no one else had noticed it yet!

Mrs. Peters was hysterical, collapsing, so that Pohl made her lie down on a couch in the living room.

"You stay with her, Timmy," he ordered, and the boy nodded.

Pohl dashed upstairs to get her smelling salts. It gave him a moment to go into his bathroom, which adjoined his bedroom. Carefully he washed his hands, making sure that the last tinge of red went down the drain, that the basin was clean, and not the faintest hint of red on the towel.

Shortly, the police cars came roaring up. It was all a confusion of uniformed policemen, a police sergeant, several plain-clothes men, a fingerprint man, a photographer. A confusion of Mrs. Peters, Timmy and Pohl telling what had happened. Out of it all, presently, a big man in a dark-blue suit seemed emerging as the person in charge.

Detective Ekers was a florid, baldish fellow, with a fringe of red hair and a sunburned, freckled face. He did a good deal of telephoning to headquarters. Then he came out into the front hall, outside the studio doorway. Mrs. Peters was still collapsed on the living-room couch. The gangling, nineteen-year-old Timmy was here with Pohl.

"I noticed a window was open in the studio," Pohl said. "Do you suppose maybe he got out that way?"

Ekers nodded. "Maybe."

Pohl was quite calm now. "Was it robbery, you suppose?"

"If it was," Ekers said, "he overlooked Ventura's diamond ring. Quite a handsome one. It's there on his finger."

The fingerprint man had been very busy. He had taken Timmy's prints, and Pohl's, as routine. But what of it? There were no fingerprints on the knife handle or the bronze statue. Then they found the empty violin case in the shrubbery outside the opened window.

"The Amati violin!" Pohl exclaimed.

Suddenly he had to change what he had planned to say. He had figured he would deny knowing that the Amati had been in the house. But his fingerprints might be on the case, now.

"He brought it home from the local bank this afternoon," he added. "So that's what the killer came after! A mighty valuable instrument!"

"He jumped out that window," Ekers said musingly, "and right away threw aside the violin case. I don't see why he'd do that. It would be easier to carry a violin in its case, than without one."

"Would it?" Pohl said earnestly. "Making away with a stolen violin, the case would attract quick attention. The Amati is a small instrument. Easy to wrap it up like an ordinary parcel."

Pohl was fairly confident that this detective didn't suspect him or Timmy. But suddenly Ekers came out with a question:

"You, Timmy—did you know the Amati was here tonight?"

The big, overgrown boy looked vacuously frightened. "Didn't know nothin' about it," he declared.

"Did you, Pohl?" Ekers persisted.

"I said I did," Pohl agreed. "What of it?"

Then suddenly Ekers remarked calmly, "We're puzzled why you washed your hands a little while ago."

Pohl was startled. "W-washed my hands?" he said. "I didn't. What makes you think I did?"

"There are globules of water in your wash basin, and your towel is moist."

"Is it?" Pohl smiled faintly. "Well, I do remember I washed them before I went to bed. That was about midnight." This detective certainly was right quick with clues, he thought. And Pohl added, "How long does it take drops of water to evaporate? Or a towel to dry?"

EKERS gave him a quick look and ignored the sarcasm. "Maestro Ventura was a great violinist in his day, wasn't he?" he queried.

"He certainly was," Pohl agreed.

Ekers nodded. "I remember hearing him. I play the fiddle a little myself. You play, don't you, Pohl?"

"Yes." Pohl smiled. "But I'm afraid

I was a great disappointment to the maestro."

"Have you a violin here?"

"Yes. A cheap one. What you'd call a 'fiddle'."

"Get it for me, will you, please?"

What the devil was this? Pohl went up to his room, came back in a moment with his violin.

"Seems a very nice one, to my untutored eyes," Ekers said, as he took the instrument out of its case.

He tuned it, plucked its strings, tightened the bow. Pohl stood watching. Why such musical interludes in the midst of a murder investigation? Yet now the detective was grimly intent.

"Is this—is this something really important?" Pohl said suddenly.

Ekers barely smiled. "It is, for a fact. Keep quiet now, please. Quiet, all of you."

Timmy stood gawping. The policemen here and in the studio all were silent now, staring wonderingly as Ekers stood up and began playing Pohl's violin. At intervals he stopped suddenly, muting the strings quickly with his fingers. Then he would prowl the front hall, playing. Now he was over by the fireplace.

"No luck," he muttered.

Surely he was not much as a real musician, Pohl thought, but his tones were true. Now he was playing a solemn, reiterated note. He moved from the hall into the studio. His fingers silenced the violin, and he stood listening.

It seemed strange, a detective playing a violin to himself at the scene of a murder! Now, suddenly, Ekers was

listening in the back doorway, at the threshold of the hall that led to the kitchen.

With a low exclamation, he bent down, played a long note, checked it, listened. Then he handed the violin and bow to a policeman beside him, and he moved away the little rug, searching until he pounced upon the loose board in the floor.

The hidden Amati! Triumphantly, Ekers gazed into one of the two S-like openings on either side of the bridge, read the inscription within and held the violin up.

"The Amati!" he declared. "I hoped it would be in tune. The vibrations of the reiterated notes I played set up sympathetic vibrations of its strings!"

The little voice of the violin, crying out to tell where it was hidden! Pohl stood with racing heart, but he had sense enough to keep quiet.

"Well I'll be darned!" one of the policemen gasped.

As he examined the Amati, Ekers beckoned the fingerprint man. He came up to Ekers and bent over the violin.

"Sure, they're his prints!" he said. "I'll check 'em, but you can see it plain enough. I remember a little scar-ridge on his right thumb. Here it is!"

"What—what is it?" Pohl heard himself murmuring, even before he realized he had spoken.

"It just means we've got you!" Ekers rasped. "No wonder you washed your hands after you hid the violin!"

Numbly, Pohl stared at the sleek patina surface of the old violin, and at his fingerprints damningly etched there in blood!

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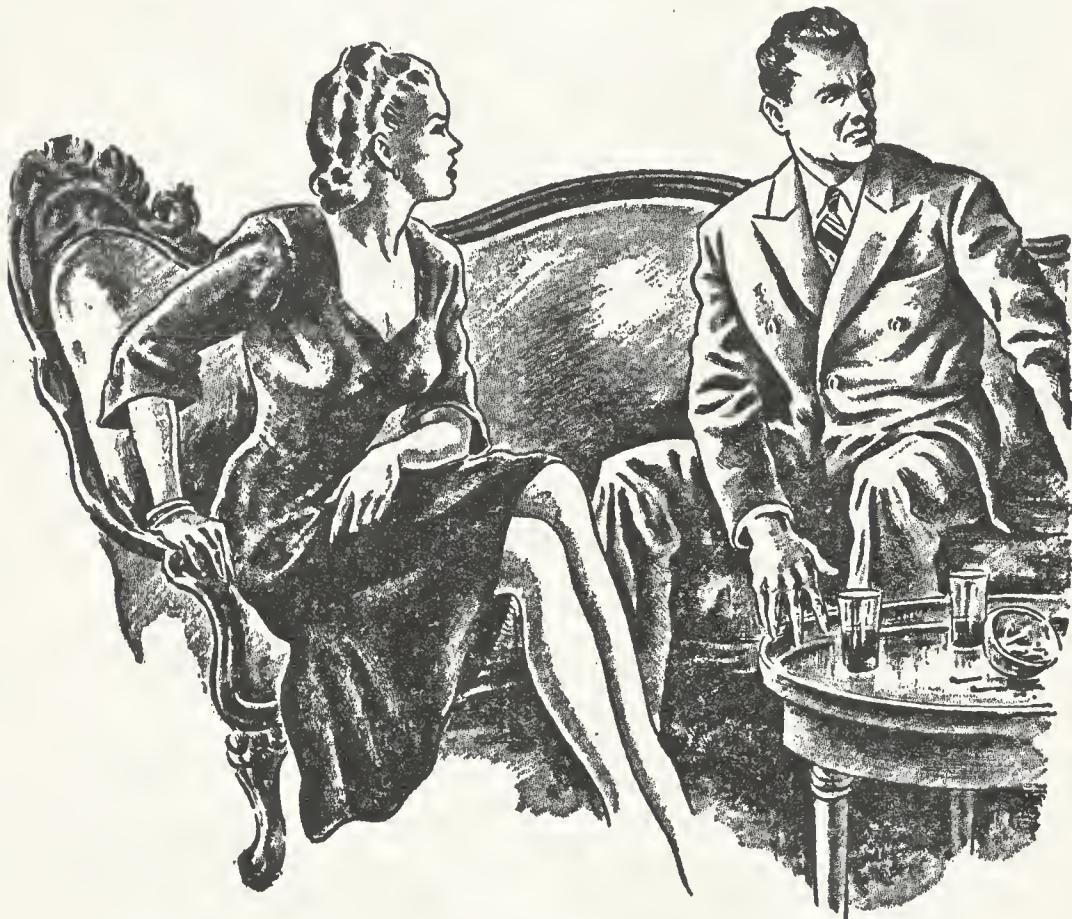
KILL ME NEVER

CHAPTER I

BACK FROM SAN QUENTIN

IT WAS "Welcome Home" to the heel of the century—me. But there was no greeting committee on hand as I swung down from the train at Glendale. Not unless you considered the two fig-

would remember me. All of them probably, because you find hardly anyone who doesn't read the papers these days, or at least listen to radio newscasts. No, they hadn't put me on television.

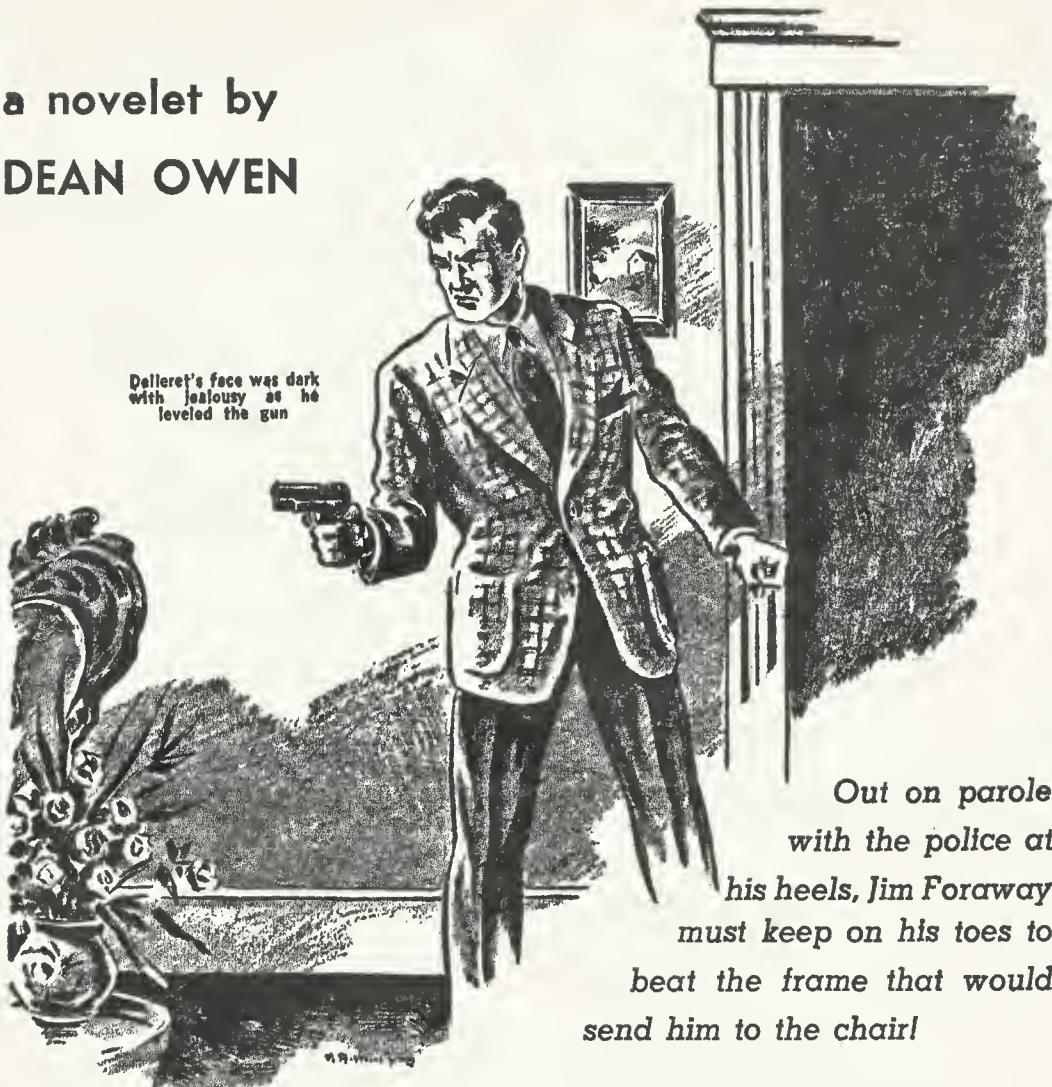


ures in dark top coats leaning very casually against a baggage truck. Beyond the station the Los Feliz hills, up where I had lived as a kid, showed a halo of Pacific Ocean sunset. I got a tight feeling in my stomach when I began to wonder how many of my old neighbors

That would come next time, because you see, there probably would be—a next time. I was under no illusions.

When I got a cab and headed for town, I glanced back. The two figures that had been by the baggage truck back there in the station yard were following

a novelet by
DEAN OWEN



me in a black sedan. Phooey for them, I thought. Of course, if I had wanted to make things easy for Hennick I could have stayed on the train to the Union Station instead of getting off at Glendale. But then who wants to make things easy for Hennick? Pay him back with his own coin. If he ever had a kind thought about anyone it had died of malnutrition.

A lot of people had protested when Mack Dermott announced that Jim Foraway would once again be putting his brains on a typewriter ribbon for the

Globe. But not as the bright young sports columnist. No, this time I would be a menial. Doing obits, probably, or at least rewrite on the home and garden page.

It took a lot of courage for Mack to fight the front office in my behalf and buck the pressure of guys like Hennick. Too bad, because I would probably undo his good work.

AT FIRST and Main I paid off the cab in the glow of dirty neon that faced an ancient building. As I took off to-

ward Central Station, the pair in the sedan cruised slowly behind me.

Half a block up I entered a white-washed brick building. Inside a small office I came up flat against a counter. Above the desk was a sign:

ALL EX-CONVICTS MUST REGISTER WITHIN
24 HOURS AFTER ARRIVAL IN THIS CITY
ORD. #42348J

The young guy in a blue uniform behind the counter shoved a clipboard in front of him when I nodded at the sign.

With pencil poised he said, "Name?"
"James Howard Foraway."

"Where incarcerated?"

"San Quentin," I supplied his waiting pencil. "Three years and four months served of a fifteen-year sentence for grand theft."

The cop's eyes got a chill in them. "So you're *the* Jim Foraway. Too bad they didn't give you life."

You learn to control your temper around cops.

Detective Lieutenant Dave Hennick wedged himself into the office. His two bird dogs who had tailed me from Glendale station were at his heels; young guys who might have come off the UCLA football squad. Some contrast to Hennick, he of the old school.

"I expected you to get off at the L.A. station," Hennick said in a voice that always reminded me of auto wheels rumbling over a plank bridge.

He rubbed the heel of his hand across the bridge of a nose that had been broken back in the old days when he tried to arrest a recalcitrant suspect. The suspect arrived at the station D.O.A., which means, "dead on arrival." That's the kind of a guy Hennick was. Never lay your hands on him.

Hennick swung the clipboard around on the counter and gave it a careful scrutiny although he knew everything about me by heart. On his birth certificate it probably said that Hennick's eyes were brown and that's about as close as you can get to describing two spots of rust in a pool of stagnant water.

I said, "I didn't want to take a chance on breaking any rules. That's why I came right down here. Because I know you're only waiting for the day you can send me back."

That was said for the benefit of the three young cops in the room, just in case something happened to me before I had a chance to do the thing I had waited three years and four months to do—make Myra talk.

Although there was such a thing as departmental loyalty, most of the younger cops, and a lot of the old-timers put Hennick in the same class with migraine.

"You won't be bothered," Hennick said crisply, "as long as you obey the terms of your parole."

That was so much pap and he knew it. Right then he looked as big to me as one of those switch engines down on Alameda Street.

When I stepped out into the hall, the two plain clothesmen followed along behind Hennick as if he had them on strings.

I looked at his face, brutality in every line of it. A throw-back, definitely, because the rest of his family had at least a touch of aristocracy, the former Mrs. Jim Foraway included. "From a fine old pioneer family," would some day be one of the lines in his obit. He was prepared to protect the reputation in the community of that fine old family. How well I knew.

He said, "One of the terms of your parole is that you're to keep away from your ex-wife."

Color heated my cheeks. Myra, you see, was Hennick's sister.

I gave Hennick and his boys a quarter inch lift of a corner of my mouth and left them, my heart thudding loudly in my ears.

WHEN I left the station I was shaking because I knew there probably would be no one in the whole city who did not remember Jim Foraway. Memories could be refreshed by going to any newspaper morgue where they could

read it all in the headlines.

Those first headlines told how Sports Reporter Foraway had absconded with the charity funds and been sentenced to 15 years. Also in the morgue clips there were other headings: MYRA FORAWAY DIVORCES CONVICT HUSBAND. And a little later: MYRA FORAWAY MARRIES. The story underneath told how Detective Lieutenant David Hennick had been best man at the wedding of his sister.

The whole thing about the charity fight had been my idea. I promoted it in my sports columns and got Paddy Dorgan and Tommy Dane, a pair of middleweights, signed for the go. The proceeds were to be used to rebuild the Eastlake Boy's Club that had burned down. You can hit your mother-in-law over the head with an ax and you'll find a certain amount of sympathizers. But a guy who steals from kids—wow! See why everybody hated my innards?

I couldn't help thinking of all those kids who had been deprived of a club-house all because of a beautiful thing like Myra. The night of the fight I had all the dough for the tickets—and I got drunk. Thirty-two thousand dollars in a black bag. The last person I saw before I passed out was Myra. Good and lovely Myra.

Probably the main reason Mack Dermott had given me a job was that he felt contrary enough to get me out of San Quentin just because Hennick wanted to keep me there. The *Globe* didn't have as big a circulation as some of the other dailies, but it could raise more racket than all the rest of them put together.

On Main Street a "B" girl smiled at me from a tavern doorway. In the old days I wouldn't have given an eyelash to her kind. This night she looked good. She had long hair that came to the shoulders of a gray tweed jacket. It wasn't the overhead neon that made her hair red. No, it was real color. She looked more like Pasadena than skid row.

This night I had more important things on my mind. I couldn't afford to violate my parole by swapping drinks

with a redhead in a tweed jacket, no matter how much I might have wanted to.

When she smiled, I shook my head, saying, "Not tonight, sister. Sorry."

Her lovely face—and it was lovely all right—seemed to freeze. Right then I saw her green eyes shine angrily. I got out of there fast. I wanted no trouble with women.

It was just in time that I remembered Foster's gym down the block. There was no use inviting trouble by passing the place. The glove and resin crowd would love to cut me up in small pieces. Once I had been their boy. But no more.

CHAPTER II

VOICE FROM THE PAST



LTMONT HOTEL was a familiar landmark and I was thankful the clerk, a sandy-haired man, was one I had never seen before. My name on the register didn't even rate a raised eyebrow from

him.

At the Altmont you had to go down a long dingy hall to the self-service elevator. It did not surprise me when I saw the cage was dark; the Altmont was noted for its lack of consideration for guests.

The minute I stepped in with my key to Three-O-Three, I felt something hard nudge my spine. The automatic doors closed as somebody in the shadows pushed the right button. The cage began to descend slowly to the basement.

My throat got all cottony. When the doors opened I saw this guy in the wash of dirty yellow light from a street level transom. His name was Bert Dailey. His plaid suit and tie, speckled with horseshoes, smelled of the track. Bert Dailey used to hang around Foster's Gym.

In one hand he held an automatic, in the other hand an envelope. He shoved the envelope at me. "Here's five grand. Take it and get out of town."

"I'm on parole," I said, edging around in the basement shadows thrown up by packing cases and stacked trunks.

Sure, I had expected a few ripe tomatoes in my face, or perhaps a ride on a rail and some hot tar and goose feathers, if they still did those things. But this; it was like a scene from a Class C movie.

"Who wants me out of town, Bert? The same guy who stole the money—the thirty-two grand?"

When he waved the envelope under my nose again I started to lift my hands as if trying to explain with a gesture the impossibility of the situation.

Suddenly I grabbed his gunhand. We wrestled across the concrete floor, Bert Dailey cursing and trying to get the gun free; me trying to keep him from committing murder. I put a leg behind him. We fell hard. His shoes made scraping sounds on the floor as he frantically tried for leverage. His breath, violent with garlic and wine, beat against my face. A two-bit hoodlum, Dailey knew all the tricks. He rolled me on my back. I thought, This is it.

At that moment I saw the other guy. Just an impression of wavy hair and a fat face and horn-rimmed glasses in the darkness. Something bright and lethal pricked the shadows. Bert Dailey shuddered and stuck to me like a moth on glue when I tried to wriggle out from under his sudden limp weight.

Desperately I tried to get up and after the fat guy. By the time I made it he was gone. A slammed alley door. The roar of a powerful motor. Silence. I walked back to Dailey, sprawled face down. If the fat stranger had painted a bullseye on Dailey's back he couldn't have done it neater.

The guy had used a silencer, otherwise somebody would be investigating the sound of the shot.

A quick search of Dailey's pockets turned up nothing. Perhaps I could hide the body. An empty packing-case was handy so I got Dailey under the armpits and hoisted him over the edge. I threw some old newspapers in on top of him.

His gun, a blued thirty-eight I picked up gingerly with my handkerchief and dropped in after him.

A gun I needed. But not that bad. Catch a paroled convict with a gun and it's all off. I didn't want to make it too easy for Hennick.

THREE weren't half a dozen people who knew the Altmont had been a sort of hideout for me, in the old days. Working nights on the paper it had given me a chance to hang around town when I wanted, instead of going to the bungalow my dad had left me out in the Los Feliz hills. I went up to the room I had taken, my knees shaking. I was trying to decide what to do next when the phone rang.

For a moment I hesitated, my hand above the receiver. I picked the phone up and said, "hello."

A nice warm voice said, "Jim. Jim darling."

Hennick had told me to stay away from Myra. Could you stay away from breathing?

"How did you know I was here?"

The voice was the same as always, low and a little trembly as if she couldn't hold herself in for the love of you, or for the love of any guy for that matter.

Myra said, ignoring my question, "I've got to see you, Jim. Right away. Please. I'm at the Malibu house."

In spite of all she had done I could have climbed right into the phone to get close to her. Then I backed off. It might as well be now, I told myself. I had a lot of questions to ask. Memories.

It was her house at Malibu and we had lived there that one sad year of our marriage.

"I'll come," I told her, "but make sure that lovely brother of yours isn't around."

"He doesn't know I'm calling you. Really."

I left the hotel by the alley door. I didn't want to give the clerk another look at me. Outside I plowed through drifting fog that put red and green halos around the neon signs. I turned to look

at the pile of dirty brick that was the Altmont.

I shivered, but not from the damp night air. Someone had wanted me out of town, five thousand dollars' worth. A fat guy with wavy hair and horn-rimmed glasses. Now he wouldn't have to pay. It could be done neatly with a murder rap. The clerk could prove I was at the hotel the same time the Medical Examiner would say Bert Dailey had died. That was all Hennick would need. There was, I decided, no time to work this out at my leisure as I had planned. No, it had to be done—fast.

Mack Dermott had wired me two hundred bucks advance when I got my release from San Quentin. I used a good chunk of it for cab fare to Malibu. We passed the Santa Monica pier and I thought of the times I used to come down there to fish with my old man when I was a kid. I wonder what he would have said if he knew I might kill my ex-wife this night. He had never liked Myra. Decoration, that's all she was, he used to say. We had some bitter arguments over that before I woke up in San Quentin one day and realized there might have been some truth in what he had said.

At the extreme north end of the Malibu Colony the cab dropped me at a pile of glass and redwood that hung out over the dark and restless sea on pilings.

She was waiting for me by the massive plate glass windows that gave you a view of Catalina Island on a clear day. You could hear the surf washing back and forth beneath the house.

"Jim." That voice again. She stood in front of me, her sleek blonde head thrown back, lifting her arms to me so that the sleeves of her loose-fitting black dress fell above her elbows.

"How did you know you could find me at the Altmont?" I asked harshly, ignoring her arms.

"I was your wife, darling. Why wouldn't I know all your secrets?" With her cool fingers on my wrist she led me to a davenport that curved expansively

before a fieldstone fireplace.

"There are some things I want to know—"

SHE pressed herself against me, cutting off my words with her mouth. For a moment I remembered that she had once been my wife.

I shoved her aside. "Has your brother called about me?" I glanced into the shadows as if expecting Hennick to jump out at me.

"We've hardly spoken since—since everything happened."

"He was best man at your wedding," I reminded her.

"That marriage was all his idea," she said. "He never liked it that I married you."

I gave a harsh laugh. "Hennick thought you should have a marriage of quality. He's a fine one to talk about quality."

She got up and mixed a drink, and handed me a glass. "To us," she said, watching me over the rim of her glass.

"To the three of us," I countered with a tight smile. "You and me and your husband."

"A Mexican divorce is quick and final, Jim. Then you and I could be remarried."

What kind of a pitch was she giving me? I took her glass and gave her mine. "Somebody slipped me knockout drops the night the thirty-two grand was stolen. I'm not going to be sucker enough to walk into it again."

Her violet eyes narrowed a little. "You think I did it, Jim?"

I showed her my teeth. "That's what I figure to find out, sweetheart."

The liquor warmed me; remember, it was my first drink in nearly four years. On the piano was a photo of a smiling young guy wearing a polo helmet. He had a spoiled, pretty face. His eyes said he could be very nasty.

I nodded at the framed photo. "Your husband?"

She nodded her blonde head. "Trent Delleret," she said bitterly. "Fine old family and fine old stony-broke."

Only one thing Myra loved better than Myra and that was money.

Watching emotion play across her hard little face, I said, "You got me out here only to tell me your husband is broke?"

She took my hands in hers and twisted around on the big davenport so that her black dress hiked up around her thighs. She pretended not to notice.

"I know a place in Mexico," she said. "A few miles from Mexico City. We could go there until things quiet down."

"One thing I'll say for you, Myra. You come right to the point."

I yanked her dress down over her knees. "What happened to the thirty-two thousand that night, Myra?"

Her mouth smiled. "You don't have to pretend with me, Jim. There's just the two of us together now. I know you've got it hidden some place."

I seized her wrists. "Who got the money?" I shouted. When she didn't answer, I lifted my hands to her white throat. She drew back from me, fright streaking across her violet eyes.

Those nights alone I had dreamed of this moment. You have plenty of time to think when the Frisco fog rolls into your cell block and you know it's the same fog that settles around the Top of the Mark and around the other bright spots where people are laughing. And you're put away from the laughter all because of a woman. It begins to grow on you, the germ of murder, until one day you accept it as casually as you accept the fact of a nose and the ability to smell a spring day.

MY FINGERS reached for her again, and suddenly the idea was dead and cold in me. She shrank back from me.

I felt a draught on my ankles and turned, the skin pricking at the back of my neck. If I hadn't seen his photo on the piano I might not have recognized Trent Delleret in the flesh. There was no polo helmet on his head this night. He wore an expensive tweed jacket and wrinkled flannel slacks. His spoiled face was tight with jealous anger.

He gestured at my cheek with the barrel of a snub-nosed .38. "My wife's lipstick always looks good on other men."

The silence was sudden, with only the wash of ocean beneath the house. In that instant I saw Myra's face. Her lips had paled, but there was a sort of wild expectancy in her violet eyes.

Delleret said, "Get out of here, Myra. Back to town!"

She didn't argue or plead, or even look at me who was being left behind for the slaughter. She grabbed her wrap off the davenport and ran outside. In a moment I heard her car move off toward the highway.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I remembered that Delleret had once been an All-American guard. He still looked as if he could move around with any guys his own weight, which was about forty pounds more than I carried. I had nothing against the guy and was sorry the thing had gotten this far. I was principally sorry for myself, because I could see I was either going to get shot or have the tar beaten out of me.

He laid the gun on the piano and shed his jacket. He staggered a little. He was more than a little drunk.

This was a bad situation. If I was lucky enough to fix Delleret's clock, all he had to do was get in touch with Henrick. The mere fact that I was in a house belonging to my ex-wife would probably violate my parole. On top of that there was still Bert Dailey wedged into that packing case in the basement of the Hotel Altmont. For my first night back in town I was working myself into a beautiful spot from all angles.

He came at me, flexing his biceps, hammering his fists solidly into his palms as if to give me a sample of what to expect. He lifted his hands and set his feet. Everything I had went into my first punch. It caught him in the eye. I felt the shock to my heels. He only grinned at me.

"I'm glad you're going to make a fight of it," he said nastily. "Don't get the idea I'm doing this because of Myra. But

I have pride. When I found out my wife was entertaining a rat like Jim Foraway, it was too much."

"Who told you I was here?"

"Anonymous phone call to my club. It seems that everybody in town hates you plenty. Everybody but Myra."

I started backing up. "It's a plant, you fool. Don't you see? Myra got me out here deliberately."

The sentence died. I thought he'd kicked me in the face. Groggy, I tried to fight him off, retreating. He slammed me across the face. The French doors, leading to the porch, flew open behind me as I hit them solidly with my shoulders. Before I could duck, he was after me. He wrestled me off my feet. I stumbled backwards, the low porch railing hitting me at the knees. I flipped in the air once, then dropped straight down into that boiling surf. Just before I hit the water I looked up. He stood grinning at me. He was, I was sure, hoping I would drown.

CHAPTER III

HOSTILE WORLD

 WHILE dropping I must have shouted my fear because my throat muscles contracted but no sound came. All I could hear was the booming surf in my ears. Then I hit the cold water.

The moment I went under my head cleared. A roller caught me and sent me flat against a piling. It jarred the breath out of me. Desperately I tried to find a toe hold in the sand, but the sloppy surf dragged me back. Again I went under in that black and salty death.

Then I was conscious of a voice beating at me above the roar of the breakers—a woman's voice.

"Keep floating, Foraway! I'm coming!"

Her voice calmed me. I felt her take me by the wrist and begin towing me through the dark water. It was slow

and painful work for my clothes weighted me down, but nevertheless I had sense enough to help her along by paddling with my free hand and kicking my feet.

We got to the beach and I sank down, gasping for breath. My rescuer was tall and leggy in a two-piece bathing suit. Even then I wondered why she would be dressed for swimming at that hour. She went to a little mound of clothes on the sand and slipped into a sweater and skirt and sandals. That, I decided, had been no bathing suit after all.

She seemed slightly embarrassed when she led me to a small coupe. I glanced back at the house. No lights showed. Cold fury beat at me as I thought of Delleret leaving me to drown. Some day, I vowed, we would settle that score.

Now that I had a chance to see her by dashlight I got a shock. It wasn't a pretty face, but interesting. Her brows arched to a fine line above eyes that had a lot of green in their gray. Her nose, after I had digested all the features, was familiar.

"I saw you on Main Street tonight," I told her. "You were standing in front of a bar. Don't tell me business is so bad you'd follow me to Malibu just to fish me out of the surf."

"You're not very smart," she said, "for an old newspaper man."

By the time she drove me back to L.A. I was shivering in my wet clothes. My face ached.

Her apartment was small, just a kitchenette and pull down bed and bath. She went into a small dressing room and returned in a few minutes wearing a red flannel robe. Her long coppery hair was still damp, but it was beginning to curl around her shoulders. Her toenails, painted crimson, winked at me from a pair of sandals.

She tossed me a blanket and told me to get out of my wet clothes. "And don't think," she said, blushing, "that this means anything. Between you and me."

She went into the kitchen to make coffee. I got out of my clothes and under

the blanket.

"You told me I'm an old newspaper man and not very smart. Now what?"

She came to stand in the kitchen doorway. "I thought you'd remember me by this time. The name is Dorry. Dorrinda Clark."

I snapped my fingers as memory suddenly roared back on me. Sure, four, maybe five years ago. A sorority kid who did campus stuff for the paper. I remembered helping her rewrite it and helping her to unlearn college journalism. It made her hang around me out of gratitude, I suppose. But I had brushed her off. Myra had claimed my thoughts in those days. In these days, too, only in a different way.

I WAS thirty years old, and right then I felt like her grandfather. I asked her why she followed me.

"Mack said to keep an eye on you. That's what I was doing on Main Street. I waited until Hennick and his boys had left; then I tried to intercept you." She blushed again. "You misinterpreted my motives."

"Yeah, I sure did."

"I just happened to see you get in a cab when you came out of the Altmont by the alley door. I followed you to Malibu. When I saw you and Delleret fighting I tried to get in the side door, but it was locked. When he knocked you into the water, I was afraid you'd drown."

I gave her a weak smile. "You weren't the only one who was afraid." I sipped my coffee.

"You were nice to me once," she said lighting a cigarette. "I haven't forgotten."

She gave me the cigarette and went into the dressing room. In a few minutes she emerged with her hair brushed and tied with a green ribbon. She wore a gray suit and sheer dark nylons and a pair of patent leather shoes.

"I'm going to a hotel," she told me. "Nobody will think of looking for you in my apartment."

That night I dreamed Bert Dailey

came swimming toward me out of the dark Pacific. Bubbles rose from a hole in his back. I came awake with the phone ringing. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was. I switched on a lamp and sat staring at the phone.

When I lifted the phone a shrill feminine voice said, "Miss Dorrinda Clark please. Western Union."

"I'll take a message."

"Regarding her wire to a Mr. Paddy Dorgan: There is no one by that name at the address she gave. Would she have another?"

My face tightened. "I don't know, but I'll sure ask her."

I put the phone back on the cradle and looked at myself in the wall mirror. I looked hard around the eyes. A lot of people including a gal named Dorrinda Clark were giving me a very bad time.

The next morning a tailor pressed the last dampness out of my clothes. My mouth tasted like a piece of dried kelp. The morning papers, I saw, carried no Page One story about a hoodlum named Bert Dailey found in a packing box in the basement of the Altmont Hotel.

At the *Globe* office typewriters stilled when I came into the city room. Several of the old-timers gave me a nod. The newcomers just stared. There was a sort of embarrassed silence. Most of those in the big room believed the stories about me and avoided my eyes. Dorry, still wearing her gray suit, gave me a friendly smile across a desk top.

I went into Mack's office. I was never so glad to see anything in my life as his ax-blade face and gray crew haircut. Maybe he didn't see the hand I stuck out at him; I don't know. Something died in me, hard.

I stood there a moment while the anger built in me. "You got me out of prison and I'm grateful. But if that's how you feel toward me—what for?"

His eyes glared at me. "Save the thanks. I should have left you up there. Your first night back and you get mixed up with Myra. You fool."

Dorry, I realized, had told him about the night before. I put my hands flat on

his desk top, right on a pile of copy paper. "You can take this job, Mack, and you know what you can do with it."

My voice trailed off. I was staring at the top story all ready for Mack's pencil to mark it up for the composing room. The lead paragraph caught my eye:

The body of a man tentatively identified as Bert Dailey was found by rubbish collectors in the basement of the Altmont Hotel. . . .

Mack caught me looking at the story and I prayed he couldn't see the shock in my eyes. He said, "You remember Bert Dailey. A two-bit hood. Used to run around with Paddy Dorgan."

"Yeah," I said dryly, "I remember both of them." I took a deep breath. "What goes with Paddy Dorgan these days, Mack?"

"He was gone for a long time. But I understand he's back hanging around Foster's Gym."

"I'd like to have a talk with him—about a lot of things."

Mack said, "You won't get much out of him. Paddy is walking on his heels. Took too many punches in the head, I guess."

SO FAR, the cops didn't know who killed Bert Dailey. Otherwise, Hennick would be looking me up at the *Globe* office. Three people had known I was at the Altmont at the time of the murder, the clerk, Myra and the killer. And there was Dorry. She was outside the hotel while Dailey was getting himself killed in the basement.

Mack put me on the society page, which is some switch from doing a sports column. I decided to lay it on the line with Dorry so asked if I could buy some dinner. She suggested her apartment, which was all right with me.

That evening when she was frying the lamb chops, I said casually, "What's the angle, Dorry? What ties you into all this?"

She wore a green apron over her blouse and skirt. She turned to me and I thought her lips went a little pale.

"You're even suspicious of me?" She

stared at me. "After I saved your life and everything?"

"I'm grateful. But there's more to it than gratitude."

"Such as?"

"You've been trying to send a wire to Paddy Dorgan. Remember good old Paddy? He was one of the boys fighting for me that night at the charity bout."

"Are you trying to insinuate I had a hand in stealing that money?" The lamb chops began to burn.

"I don't know what to think. Has Mack Dermott put you on a feature story about me and my shady past, or have you got another reason for digging up a walking corpse like Paddy Dorgan?"

She walked to the door and opened it and stood there glaring at me. It was an obvious invitation to leave. I took it.

As I walked past her, I said, "Any of the boys on the sports desk could have told you that Paddy Dorgan has started hanging around Foster's Gym again."

The door slammed behind me. Quickly I went down the hall then cut toward an open window. I climbed out on a fire-escape I had spotted that morning. I could see her through her window, go to the phone. She picked up the phone, frowning. Then she put it down. She took off her apron and stepped out into the hall.

I was disappointed. I thought I might be able to eavesdrop a little.

In the basement the noise of the big hot water heater covered my footsteps. I saw her unlock a small door leading to a storage bin. Trunk hinges groaned. In a moment she found what she was looking for. She closed the trunk. She had an object stuck under her arm when she stepped out of the storage bin. When she turned and saw me there, her face went dead white.

It was a dusty black leather bag I snatched from under her arm. On one side, in gold letters, was stamped: *Foster's Gym*.

The last time I had seen that bag it had held thirty-two thousand dollars of charity money.

CHAPTER IV

PUNCH-DRUNK PUGILIST

FOR a moment she stood pressed back against the stack of trunks, her bosom, under the tight jersey blouse, stilled as she held her breath.

"All right," I said, trying to keep the cold fury out of my voice, "Let's hear you explain."

She sighed and looked away for a moment. Then she said, "Paddy Dorgan was my brother's best friend. We played together when we were kids. Paddy was older."

"Sort of a first love," I said sarcastically.

She shook her red head at me. "Mack can tell you how it was with Paddy. He's crazy now. Since my brother died and Paddy's been sick I've tried to look after him. Paddy disappeared right after you were sent up. I decided now that you were back I'd better get in touch with him. I knew you were going to find out who the real thief was."

"Go on."

"You see, if you ever prove you didn't steal that money, I'm afraid they'll railroad Paddy. Once when he was a kid he was arrested for robbery."

I gave her a crooked smile. "Thanks, Dorry. Thanks a lot."

She ran after me when I started up the stairs, clutching at my arm. "Paddy didn't do it."

I flung her aside and went out into the street.

Back at the office I had just stowed the bag in a big desk drawer when I raised up to find Hennick standing there. He stared at me out of his rusty brown eyes. For a minute I thought he'd come to arrest me for killing Bert Dailey. I began to get panicky. Just when all the pieces were beginning to fit! I looked around for some way to make a break for it.

Hennick touched my bruised cheek. "I saw Trent Delleret today. He got a black eye out of it. He was pretty drunk.

I asked him how he got the shiner and he started cussing you. Myra was with him and she made him shut up. Otherwise I might have found out that you were in Malibu last night seeing my sister."

My heart beat wildly with relief at not being picked up for that Bert Dailey thing. "You can't prove it, Hennick," I told him.

He put his big hands flat on the desk top. "If you do anything," he said under his breath, "to break up Myra's marriage, you'll wish you'd been dead for a long time."

I felt cold inside as I always did when facing Hennick. Without another word he wheeled out of the office, big and tough and full of murder.

In an all-night coffee shop, I was waiting for scrambled eggs when I happened to look through the front window toward the street where three cars were waiting for the light to change.

One of the cars was a Cad. In the light from the coffee shop window I could see the guy at the wheel, a fat man with thick wavy hair and horn-rimmed glasses. Something began to buzz around in my head. I rushed for the door, the fry cook yelling that my eggs were done. Outside, the light changed. The Cad shot across the street.

I had one of my few breaks. A cruising cab was just turning the corner. I hailed it. I yelled at the driver to follow the Cad tail lights on the hill ahead of us.

WE MADE the top of Fort Hill, which had been the first aristocratic district back in pioneer days. In the cross-patch of narrow streets we lost the Cad. The fat guy, I was sure, had gone into one of the apartment houses. We cruised around, but no luck. We were at the end of a dead end street when I saw the sign: Hennick Street.

Sure, now I remembered. I stared at a row of new swank apartment houses. Up here was the site of the old Hennick mansion on Hennick Street. It was named after Hennick's great grand-

father who had come West with a burro loaded down with tin pans.

Up here on the old hilltop was where a park was supposed to be. The ground had been broken for the project just before I went away to San Quentin. It was to be a memorial to the vanishing section of the old town, with the first high school and a few mansions so tourists could get an idea of what the city had looked like in the early days. But instead of a park there were nice shiny apartment houses with such fancy names as *Vista Del Mar, The Crystal, Hermitage.*

It made me lose some of my tension to realize that the fat guy was flesh-and-blood. I had been starting to think that perhaps it was an apparition standing behind Bert Dailey down in the Altmont basement and firing a bullet into his back.

The next morning I climbed an old stairway to a big familiar room that still smelled of sweat and old leather. Memories came crowding back. Once I had been welcome at Foster's Gym.

Foster, a little bald guy with a mustache, saw me first. The news must have spread fast because the big room stilled. A pair of fighters in the ring turned to look at me.

Out of the corner of his mouth, Foster said, "You played it right down the line, real smart."

I would like to have explained how things were, but I had to move fast. Before another sunrise they would have me tied in with Bert Dailey.

He took a dollar bill out of his pocket, crumpled it and threw it into a spittoon. "Now," he said, "you've got thirty-two thousand and one dollars."

I felt color mount to my face. I heard a shuffling step beside me. A fat man with a ring-marked face reached for the bill in the cuspidor. He wiped it off on the leg of his dirty trousers and shoved it into his pocket. He started away, walking with a peculiar up and down motion.

"Paddy," I said softly. "Paddy Dorgan."

His eyes, I saw, as he turned, looked right through me. "Buy you a drink,

Paddy," I said, a little sick at my stomach. I had hoped that maybe Mack Dermott had been wrong about him.

Foster said, from the fringe of watching pugs, "Leave Paddy alone. Drinkin' ain't for him."

"Coffee, then, Paddy," I urged, my voice tight in my throat as I saw the angry faces around me. One word from Foster and they'd kick me downstairs.

Paddy fell in step beside me. At the bottom of the stairs, I saw Foster still watching.

A lot of people, it seemed to me suddenly, were wishing I'd drop dead.

Paddy and I drank our coffee in a Spring Street hash house. I couldn't help but remember the shrewd, tough fighter of four years ago. Something had taken the brain out of him. Fat and stupid, he was now, with his brown hair clipped right down tight against his scalp. Probably to save haircuts.

I felt ill-at-ease not knowing how to start. "Had any good fights lately?"

"Goin' fight nex' week. 'Pedro.' He jerked a hand toward San Pedro. "I got to get me the light heavy belt before I hang up my gloves."

PADDY had always been one to take five punches to get in one of his own —a fast route to cerebral palsy. Yet it didn't seem possible that a man could get this bad in these few years.

"What happened that night, Paddy?" I said sharply.

He spilled some coffee on the front of his dirty shirt. "Sailor Ansen come at me and I went for his basket—" He began weaving about on the chair, ducking imaginary punches. I laid a hand on his arm.

"I mean the night the thirty-two thousand dollars was stolen. I had gone to the box office and picked up the money. One of those armored trucks was coming by to take it to the bank. But I was drunk and I took the money to the dressing room. You were there, Paddy, and I had another drink. Then you left and Myra came in. That's the last thing I remember. When I woke up, the

money was gone."

"Sailor Ansen hit me right on the button. I never could catch him. He was on his bicycle."

When he started to rise, I said, "They never found the money bag. But I know where it is. Remember a girl named Dorry? You and her brother were friends. What about her, Paddy? Why would she have that money bag?"

He had some difficulty extracting his feet from around the chair legs. "You come an' watch me train, huh, boy?"

I followed him out onto Spring Street. He took me by the arm and led me back to Foster's Gym, mumbling about the fight he was going to have. In front of the gym was a yellow convertible. Even though the top was up I instinctively knew who was behind the wheel. I let Paddy go on upstairs.

"Jim!" It was Myra's voice.

Today she wore a red dress with a white collar. Her blonde hair curled nicely around her small head. A hundred-dollar alligator bag lay on the seat. Her nylon-clad legs looked good.

"You're a little coward," I told her viciously, "or you wouldn't have run out on me the other night."

"I went for help, Jim. Believe me. When I came back, the house was dark. I was so afraid he'd kill you."

"Not a bad story."

She gripped the wheel tightly with her white gloved hands. "Jim, if you still have that money, let's go away together. I'm sick of this."

I gave her a hard smile. "How mercenary can you get?"

She eyed me critically. "You have got the money, haven't you, Jim?"

Without bothering to answer, I turned on my heel and walked off. Behind me I heard the clash of gears. How, I asked

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myself, had I ever thought I loved her. But more important how had she known that I'd be around Foster's Gym? She didn't park there just out of sheer coincidence.

Myra, I recalled bitterly, had a morbid interest in prize fighters. Once I had even suspected she was fascinated by one Paddy Dorgan. But surely not now, not a fat hulk with a shaved head and no brain.

It was a blind alley where ever I turned. Everything led back to the fat guy with the wavy hair and horn-rimmed glasses. I tried to think of everyone I had ever known who might answer his description. He fit in exactly nowhere. Then I got to thinking about Fort Hill and Hennick Street and the new apartment houses where a park was supposed to be.

After a shave and breakfast, I left the crummy hotel where I was parking and presented myself at the City Clerk's office. I found the book that contained maps and tax lists of Fort Hill.

Out of the corner of my eye, as I flipped through the pages, I noticed the clerk giving me a peculiar look. But I was so keyed up at the knowledge that at last I might be on the right track that it didn't register. In that list of property owners one name leaped out at me. My hands began to shake.

I was staring at the open page when the clerk said, jerking up his head from a newspaper, "You *are* Foraway!"

There it was on the front page—my mug picture. Beside it was a photo of the late Bert Dailey. And the headline:

PAROLED REPORTER SOUGHT IN KILLING

The clerk was already yelling for help. Faces swung my way. A uniformed cop started through the big lobby doors toward me, dragging at his gun. A frightened woman began screaming as I dashed for the back door. The noise followed me. You have to know your city to make a break like that in broad daylight. I hit for the alleys. Behind me a police whistle shrilled.

CHAPTER V

FUGITIVE FROM THE LAW



THREE blocks away I got a cab and headed south. From a liquor store phone booth I called Mack Dermott. "Meet me at Dorry's place," I told him, unable to think of a better locale for a showdown.

"Listen, Jim," his voice came at me over the phone, "every cop in town is hot on your tail."

I said coldly, "You'd better meet me, Mack. I mean it."

His voice changed. "Are you telling me what to do?"

There no longer was any use of pretense. I let him have it. "I looked up some things in the tax office today, Mack. There are some interesting angles on the Fort Hill Park deal. Want me to explain over the phone?"

A little tiredly, he said, "I can't make it before night. Keep out of sight until then."

As I began walking aimlessly the full panic came down on me. Hennick had what he wanted. They suspected me of murdering Bert Dailey. As an ex-convict they could gun me down and a coroner's jury would not ask too many questions.

Keeping to side streets I started back toward town. I drank beer. I killed some of the day in bowling alleys. Every time I saw a cop I froze.

It got dark. By the time I got to Dorry's neighborhood I was sweating. I didn't think Mack would turn me in, but under the circumstances I couldn't be sure. All I had so far to go on was supposition. Dorry drove up in her coupe. Nobody that I could see was tailing her. I followed her inside.

"Mack said he'll be along shortly," she said, taking her keys from a brown bag. Then she laid a hand on my arm and her mouth began to jerk. "Jim, you didn't—do it?"

"No, I didn't kill Bert Dailey."

When I said that she relaxed. We stepped into her apartment, right into a

shambles. A frightened cry burst from her throat at sight of the wreckage. I yanked her roughly back and dived into the apartment. No one was there. The bed was down, the floor covered with sheets and blankets. A scrabble of lacy things from emptied drawers lay on the dressing room floor.

"I stuck your chin out, baby," I said, suddenly feeling very sorry for her. She swayed against me and I felt her coppery hair against my cheek. Then she pulled away and shed her belted brown coat. She rolled up the sleeves of her dress and we went to work straightening up the mess. There were a hundred questions I wanted to ask. Among them, had Hennick been to the office looking for me? But I held off. She was shaken, make no mistake about that.

"I don't understand all this," she said weakly.

By the time Mack arrived, we still had a lot to do.

"Somebody was looking for something," I told him in answer to his surprised question.

He came into the room, a wiry little man in a tweed suit. He threw his hat on the sofa and sat down. "You could have played square with me about Bert Dailey and what happened at the Altmont," Mack said accusingly.

"This grows on you, Mack. The more you dig in."

"This time it's murder. That makes it different. No longer is it just a case of swiping dough that cheats some kids out of a clubhouse. A man is dead, a hoodlum, sure, but they can still kill you for it."

I said, watching his face, "First I find out that Myra thinks I've still got the money. Then I get rescued from Myra's husband by Dorry. It turns out that Dorry used to know Paddy Dorgan. Then I find that she's been keeping the bag that held the thirty-two grand. She says she owes Dorgan a debt or something because he was her brother's best friend."

"About the bag," said Mack. "I knew she had it. She found it in the alley out-

side the Arena the night of the big steal. I had her covering the doings from the woman's angle. When the money turns up missing, Dorry does some prowling before the cops get to it. I told her to hang onto the bag in the hope it might have prints, because I knew Hennick would destroy any evidence he could in order to send you up. He never forgave you for marrying his sister, marrying into that *pioneer*"—Mack said it like a curse—"family of his." He sighed. "But the bag held no prints at all."

I WHIRLED a chair around and straddled it. "I'm in this, Mack, up to my protruding ears. Somebody sent Dailey to pay me five grand to blow town, somebody who had a nice setup here and somehow figured with me coming back from San Quentin it stood a chance of getting tipped over. When I jumped Dailey, this guy behind it all, pulls a gun."

I described the fat guy with the wavy hair and the horn-rimmed glasses. Mack said he didn't know him.

"Maybe the whole thing could have been cleared up four years ago," Mack said, "if you hadn't been such a fool. Before any of us could help you, the D.A. had got a guilty plea out of you."

I lowered my head. "I thought it was Myra who had taken that money. I was so crazy in love with her, I couldn't think. All I wanted to do was protect her."

Something scraped along the roof over our heads. Somebody or something was moving up there. It came again, a dragging sound.

"Probably a cat," Dorry said nervously. "They're thick in this neighborhood."

I was too keyed up to worry about cats. Had I shown a little more interest, we could have cleaned the whole thing up then and there.

"And now we come to you," I said to Mack.

He stiffened. "Before you jump me you'd better stop and think that I had a tough time wrangling you a parole when the loot was still thought to be in your

possession. I had to go pretty high to get that for you."

"I still don't know why you did it, Mack. I'd like to believe it was out of friendship. But something else ties in—the Fort Hill Park."

Mack said, "Go on, Jim."

"The city was supposed to have Fort Hill as a park. Ward Wheelock was councilman for that district four years ago. You knew him and so do I, a fat, pompous politician who hung around the gyms and bought a box seat by the year at the Arena."

Dorry said, "You're not accusing Mack—"

"I've got a hunch that maybe Wheelock swung enough votes in the city council to turn that property back so somebody could buy it up for the price of thumbtacks. It's valuable property, Mack. But that would take money for a quick bribe. Maybe the opportunity was too good to pass up. Thirty-two thousand in cash might do it. Maybe Wheelock took the money and fixed it so property could be purchased from the city on closed bids."

Mack looked angry. "And now you look up the tax records and find I own property on Fort Hill. Is that what you're driving at?" When I nodded, he said, "My old man left me that property twenty years ago. Look it up if you want."

I wanted to believe him. "I hope that's the truth, Mack, because I'm going to get the truth out of Wheelock. For the first time I've really got my teeth into something."

Mack looked up at me gravely. "Wheelock's been dead for a year. Heart attack."

That rocked me back on my heels. Before I could open my mouth I heard a whirring sound at the door. I had worked a police beat on the paper too long not to know what that sound was; somebody was boring a peephole in the door. A puff of sawdust drifted floorward.

My throat tightened. "Thanks, Mack," I said under my breath. "Thanks a lot for bringing Hennick."

FOR IT was now Hennick's bull voice in the hall. He had seen me through the peephole. Hennick's shoulder was smashing against the door.

I turned wildly for the window. Mack cried: "If you try and break for it, Hennick can kill you!"

The door crashed in. Hennick, momentarily off balance, ploughed into the room. One quick glance at the hall showed it was empty. Hennick, then, was alone. Bent over like that, he took the full smash of my fist against his jaw. He fell to his knees. I kicked his gun aside, and he stared at me stupidly out of his rusty red eyes.

Then I was racing for the hallway. I remembered Dorry's hands tight against her lips. I couldn't tell whether she was frightened for me or someone else. Hennick might have men downstairs for all I knew. I swung myself over the ledge of the hall window to the fire-escape. I scrambled up the ladder to the roof, as I heard Hennick roaring from the apartment below, trying to get to the phone.

I had not taken three steps across the tarred roof in the moon-swept darkness when I saw the huddled shape of a man in a dark suit. Dinner clothes. A streak of red across his white shirt. His hands opened and closed spasmodically. It was Trent Delleret, Myra's current husband, who had made that scraping sound on the roof, trying to crawl in his agony. That sound had been made by no cat, it had been made by a dying man.

CHAPTER VI

GUILTY MAN



NO ONE ELSE was on the roof. I dropped beside Delleret. The area of the roof where he lay was wet and sticky. He had lost a lot of blood. Downstairs I could hear Hennick yelling into a phone. Prowl cars would be converging on this apartment house in a matter of minutes. Delleret clutched my arm. "I followed

—him here," he said thickly in his halting speech. "He—he went through the girl's apartment. He—he came up here to escape when you came up the stairs. He saw me when I followed him. He took a knife."

"Who was it?" I demanded hoarsely, expecting Hennick to pop over the roof edge any second.

He looked at me for a moment. His lips made fluttering movements. "Fort Hill," he gasped. "The Crystal—"

He sighed and fell back. There was no pulse.

In the distance as I huddled there, came the thin wail of a siren. From the opposite direction another siren joined the first.

I cleared the jump to the next apartment building at full tilt. I raced down the back stairs and along a service alley just as brakes squealed in front of Dorry's apartment house. I ran as I had never run before.

Weak and shaken I ducked prowls cars for two blocks, then started walking. You can talk all you want about a criminal evading capture, but sooner or later some bright rookie with his eye on a sergeant's stripes who has a memory for faces, will get you.

Two cabs later, I paid off my driver at the edge of Fort Hill. "The Crystal," Delleret had said. I had seen the place on my last tour up here.

There were no familiar names on the letter boxes at the Crystal, so I punched the manager's buzzer and hoped I would not run into the lethal end of a gun. Murder had been done twice, Bert Dailey and now Trent Delleret. I wondered how Myra would look in mourning.

A gray-haired woman opened the door. "I scraped the paint off the fender of a Cad this morning, driven by a short plump man with bushy hair and wearing horn-rimmed glasses," I told her. "I want to pay for any damage." I gave her one of Mack Dermott's cards.

She looked at the card. "You must mean Mr. Mills. He owns the building. He lives in the pent house, but I don't believe he's home."

"Maybe he'll have a servant I can talk to."

"He lives alone."

That's what I was hoping to hear. I thanked her and told her to have Mills give me a call. I went outside, then ducked to the rear entrance. I climbed the stairs to the roof on the fifth floor. Up there was a California bungalow set right down amidst palms and shrubbery like it belonged in the suburbs. Plenty of redwood furniture. Below, the lights of the city spread out all the way to Long Beach. A window was open. I climbed in and switched on a lamp. The bungalow was expensively furnished in bamboo. There was nobody around.

With my heart banging in my ears I prowled into a room that had been fixed up like a gymnasium with weights and a heavy and light punching bag. In the bathroom in the medicine chest, I saw a bottle of brown liquid and I knew I was finally on the right track. I unscrewed the top and got a whiff of the contents.

FROM behind me, a voice said, "That was very smart. The part about scraping paint off my fender."

My throat went tight. I held up the bottle. "Spirit gum," I said, turning, but seeing nothing in the shadows. "You were pretty clever at that. I would never have recognized you that night in the basement when you killed Dailey by mistake."

"Shut up and don't move. I've got a gun on you." I could hear him dialing the phone.

I edged forward. "You always were a smart one. Was this apartment house your cut of the deal? Councilman Wheelock liked your kind. You stole the thirty-grand and paid Wheelock his fancy bribe and got in on this deal."

I jumped then, the minute he turned his back to speak into the phone. We wrestled across the grass carpeted floor, knocking over chairs. With one free hand, I tore at his toupee. In spite of the spirit gum holding it to his scalp, my hand came away with a chunk of hair. His head, round like the end of a

bullet with its clipped hair, shone with sweat. Paddy Dorgan's eyes didn't have that faraway stupid look now. As we broke apart, he shot me.

The bullet was in me some place, that much I knew. But I could feel nothing. I sat on the floor, feeling silly and wanting to laugh because there was no pain.

I said, "A nice trick hanging around the gym, leading a double life. When you found out Dorry had that money bag, you ransacked her place. Delleret knew you'd been hanging around Myra. He was jealous. He followed you to Dorry's place. When he cornered you on the roof, you stuck a knife in him."

Holding the phone with one hand, the gun with the other, Dorgan dialed again. This time he said, "I've got him—"

He evidently thought I had no chance, bleeding like I was. I yanked one end of the grass rug when he paused to light a cigarette. His feet shot out from under him. He came down hard on his head. I crawled across the room and picked up the gun he had dropped. Dorgan lay there, moaning softly.

I said, "You had to keep up the disguise as long as I was alive. Or up for murder where they'd put me in the gas house. You knew I'd find out the truth eventually with Mack's help. When I got out of San Quentin, you got panicky and started hanging around Foster's Gym again, the old Paddy Dorgan. You hired Bert Dailey to scare me out of town with the five grand."

He lifted his head to stare at me. He put his hands under him to give himself leverage.

I hit him between the eyes with the gun. He sank back to the floor.

How long it was until Myra came, I have no idea. But there she was standing in the doorway, her eyes wild.

"There's your lover boy," I told her, waving the gun at Dorgan.

She gave a little cry. She ran across the room in her bright red dress, showing me an edge of lacy petticoat. She dropped to her knees beside him.

"Get off your knees," I told her. "You'll get holes in your nylons."

She stared at me out of her violet eyes.

When I tried to give her a cold smile it seemed that my face was falling apart. "You and he were in it from the beginning. When he couldn't scare me out of town, you got me out to Malibu and phoned your husband at the same time. You thought Delleret would either kill me or I'd kill him. Either way you'd be rid of a husband. You wanted Paddy Dorgan. You wanted him all along, even when I was married to you! You precious tramp!"

SHE was still on her hands and knees and now her tears dripped down on Dorgan's crumpled form. Sight of them together like that sickened me.

"As long as I was alive," I told her, "Paddy had to play it safe."

She tried to smile through her tears at me. "Listen, Jim. I've been a tramp. You're right. But I can change. I'll be good to you, Jim."

She started crawling toward me and I could see beyond her wet eyes into her scheming brain.

"Get away, Myra!" I cried. "You'd like to get your hands on this gun. Then you could fix me once and for all!"

But that didn't stop her. My nerves began to scream and I could feel sweat on my face. She came closer. I didn't want to kill her—I felt my senses slipping away. I wouldn't be able to do anything about Myra, I knew that now. Just sit there and let her put a bullet in my head. I fell back, the wall catching me at the shoulders. I was slumped like that when Hennick stepped into the room and said, "Don't touch that gun, Myra."

I could tell by his face that he had been standing out there taking it all in. How he got here I don't know. Followed Myra, perhaps. One side of his face was skinned where I had hit him. He held a snub-nosed .38 in his hand. This was it. Curtains.

"I've tried to protect the honor of my family," he said, his rusty red eyes a little wild. "It doesn't mean much these days, but it means something to me. I knew you had a hand in taking that money, Myra. I knew it all along. And I sent Foraway up for it."

From the floor Myra began to whimper. "You're a policeman. You can kill him. Everything will be over."

Hennick stood there, holding his gun, his head cocked as Paddy Dorgan began to groan. He said, "I hope you never pull out of this, Foraway, because you've brought nothing but misery to me and my sister." He stood staring at the blood on my shirt, as if undecided. Then his gun barrel lifted an inch.

I held my breath, watching him through a haze. His finger tightened on the trigger and I tensed, wanting to scream but unable to utter a sound. All I could think of in that awful minute was Dorry and how she had risked her neck in that treacherous surf to save me.

Two plainclothesmen entered the room, one from the front door, one from the window. The two young cops who had tailed me from Glendale that night a hundred and fifty years ago.

Hennick whirled at the sound they made. "What are you doing here!" he demanded.

Blandly, one of them said, "You assigned us to the case yourself, Lieutenant. Remember?"

For a moment Hennick glared at them. Then his heavy shoulders sagged. He put his gun and badge on the table before he walked out of the room.

In the newspaper business you get used to things and take every assignment that comes along. But Mack didn't have me cover the trial and the subsequent convictions. He put me back on the sports desk. Those kids I told you about have their clubhouse. It opened last week.



Bo Chang hit the girl
across the cheek

Shells of Justice

Lee Yin expected his lovely bride and a welcoming kiss—not that knife-scarred evil one, clutching the ugly gun!

LATE that afternoon, dishonor descended heavily upon the house of Lee Yin Sam. He did not discover it until the hour of evening rice, when he came home from the oyster cannery to find that his key would not open the front door of his little white cottage on the hillside back of town.

True, the key worked the lock, but

there was an inner bolt to supplement it. This bolt was the one which Lee Yin Sam and his bride of just a few months, Fragrant Peach Petal, used only at night when they were ready to retire. Yet now, with the sky still brightly red from a setting sun on the rim of the Pacific's far horizon, this bolt was tight in its keeper. Although there was day-

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

light, the door had been barred as if against the dark intrusion of midnight.

A troubled frown crossed Lee Yin Sam's ordinarily serene face, while a premonition entered his heart. It was not like Fragrant Peach Petal to lock herself in, especially at the hour of his homecoming. On the contrary, she usually stood waiting, framed here in the cottage doorway like a lovely picture, to welcome him when his day's toil was ended. What, then, could be wrong?

Puzzled, he knocked.

For a long moment there was no answer, and Lee Yin Sam's sense of impending danger grew with each passing instant. He tried to dismiss the feeling and tell himself that it had its roots in his own physical weariness.

The day had been a difficult one, what with the extra loading and unloading of his hydraulic-hoist dump truck, the added burden its mechanical failure had imposed upon him, and finally the traffic citation he had been given by a pair of State Highway patrolmen who had trailed him in their radio cruiser and flagged him down.

In all his years as a driver for the oyster cannery, that had been the first police ticket Lee Yin Sam ever received. It made a blemish on his hitherto spotless record, an undeserved black mark which was the dump truck's fault rather than his own. But the law cannot arrest a truck. The driver is the one who must be held responsible for its imperfections on a busy hig'way. So Lee Yin Sam had been stopped, lectured and cited, then ordered to turn back with his load of shells.

It is written that small worries breed large fears. Remembering the wisdom of this ancient proverb, Lee Yin Sam tried to convince himself that the day's earlier vexations, trivial and of minor importance, were now magnifying in his mind the significance of the locked door. Undoubtedly Fragrant Peach Petal would have some commonplace explanation for it.

EVEN so, his premonition persisted. He knocked again.

This time he heard the bolt slide back. The door slowly opened, and suddenly Lee Yin Sam knew that he was stand-

ing upon the threshold of disaster. For it was not his bride who welcomed him. It was a small, dapper Chinese with evil in his slanted eyes, a knife-scar across the tight yellow skin of his left cheek, and a gun in his right fist.

The man was a stranger; but there was no mistaking the malice of his smile and the menace of his automatic. The smile broadened to a mocking grin and the gun came up to level itself steadily at Lee Yin Sam's muscular chest.

"Well, well, well," the stranger chuckled. "The lord and master of the mansion." He gestured with his free hand. "Walk right in, pal. And don't try to pull no cracks about this is all a mistake. It ain't. I know you. I recognize you on account you look exactly like the picture your wife's got stuck up on the parlor mantelpiece."

"I—I—"

"You're Lee Yin Sam."

"Quite so. But—"

The smaller man's grin vanished and his eyes narrowed to ugly slits. "Okay. So we been waiting for you. Walk right in, I said. Fast. Join the party. In fact, there can't be no party until you join it. Come on, come on, move them big feet of yours. Before I get impatient and make with the trigger."

"I don't understand—"

"You will, chum, you will. Unless you get frisky and make me put a slug right through you. Big as you are, a thirty-two pill can cut you down to burying size. Keep that in mind. Now come in and quit giving me conversation."

Lee Yin Sam strode massively through the doorway, conscious that the gun covered him while his captor again closed and bolted the door itself. Then the weapon prodded at his spine and he moved through the neat, inexpensively furnished living room into a kitchen that reeked of cigarettes and cheap whiskey.

"Petal!" he cried out, hoarsely.

His bride sat cowering in a chair beyond the table, and there was mute terror in her almond eyes. Fragrant Peach Petal was as exquisitely dainty as the flower for which she had been named—a tiny, fragile creature whose beauty made Lee Yin Sam's heart ache when-

ever he looked at her.

Peach Petal had the cameo features and clear ivory complexion of a school-girl, but her figure was ripe with the curves of gloriously youthful womanhood. Not even the stiffly starched and ironed crispness of her house dress could wholly conceal those rounded contours, nor could you possibly misinterpret the way the dress was mussed, the torn place at the shoulder where a hint of smooth golden skin showed through. Her hair, too, usually so sleekly coiffed that its blackness seemed burnished, was in disorder; and there was a small bruise on her arm.

These things Lee Yin Sam saw in a single agonized glance. Then he looked across the table, and for the space of time it takes for a leaf to fall from a tree to the earth, it seemed as if his heart stopped beating.

"Bo Chang!" he choked, finally.

The man who sat there opposite Fragrant Peach Petal was drunk; but not too drunk to brandish an automatic which was mate to the one in the hand of the Chinese who had just prodded Lee Yin Sam into the kitchen. And if that first Chinese had the appearance of evil, then this leering, drunken Oriental was the very personification of deadly viciousness. Unlike his companion, his cheek was not scarred, but the marks of dissipation were deeply etched at the corners of his thin mouth, and his eyes were those of a devil. A killer-devil.

"Ah," he said. "So you know me."

Lee Yin Sam stared with disbelief. "Bo Chang!" he repeated in a harsh whisper. "But—but you are dead!"

"For a dead man I have an astonishing thirst," Bo Chang said. He picked up a brown bottle with his free hand, tilted it to his lips, put his head far back and let the whiskey run noisily down his throat. "I'll bet that's the first time you ever saw a ghost knock off four fingers of rotgut, eh, Sammy Lee?"

LEE YIN SAM paid no heed to this Americanization of his name. So great was his shock that his own tongue reverted to the North China dialect of his fathers, though he himself had been born and had grown to manhood right

here in California. "You are dead!" he insisted. "A year ago your body was taken from the surf off Shell Cove. Battered, drowned, dead. Weeks dead, bloated dead, hideously fish-eaten dead. So dead that only your clothing and watch and wallet identified you. Dead, I tell you. Dead!"

"Sure," Bo Chang smirked. "And after an indecently short interval you married my lovely widow."

Fragrant Peach Petal made an imploring gesture with her small, delicate hands. "Please — please — I didn't know—"

"Skip it, baby, skip it," Bo Chang said. "Don't fret yourself over it. How could you guess I'd been in a brawl with some sucker from over in Las Vegas and had to put a dent in his skull with a ball-peen hammer? How could you possibly know I traded clothes with him and dumped him in the ocean?"

Lee Yin Sam drew a ragged breath. "So that's how it was!"

"Yeah, that's how it was. The sucker had a wad of dough on him. Four or five grand. And so—"

"And so you slew him, robbed him."

"That's one way of putting it," Bo Chang shrugged. "You can't blame me for blowing town and playing dead, can you? After all, I wasn't fool enough to stick around with a murder rap hanging over my head. Besides, married life was beginning to bore me. And this sucker from Vegas made an excellent substitute corpse to be planted in my grave when they finally fished him out of Shell Cove. It was a perfect setup."

Bo Chang laughed reminiscently, sardonically. "My luck was in and I rode it hard," he went on. "I lammed south to San Francisco and ran the bankroll up to fifteen thousand bucks in three nights' play at a Chinatown fan-tan joint."

Fragrant Peach Petal whispered: "You—you murderer!"

"Lay off that kind of talk, baby. You're a fine one to be calling names. You, who are nothing but a bigamist."

"Now wait!" Lee Yin Sam burst out bitterly. "She married me because she thought you were dead. If she committed bigamy, it was unintentional. And she deserved some happiness, after the

kind of life she led with you."

Bo Chang cocked a raffish eyebrow.
"Oh, so?"

"You know it's so. You were unfaithful to her. You beat her, mistreated her—"

"Maybe that was because I knew she was in love with some other guy. You, Sammy Lee."

"All right, so she loved me even though she was your wife. But she was never false to you. Marrying you was an ugly mistake she'd made, but she stuck to her bargain—until you died."

"Ah, but I didn't die," Bo Chang purred. "I'm alive, pal. That means she's still my wife, not yours. My wife, to do with as I please. I can take up right where I left off. Like this, if I feel so inclined." As swiftly as a striking serpent he reached over the table and hit the girl a cruel open-handed slap across the cheek, hard enough to leave the angry red imprint of his fingers upon her flawless complexion.

WIILDLY Lee Yin Sam started to lunge forward, but sudden gun-pressure on his spine froze him in his tracks. The scar-faced Chinese behind him said: "Easy, big boy. Don't act like a Mongolian idiot." Then he laughed uproariously at his own punning jest.

"Yeah," Bo Chang said. "Better not pull any funny stuff while my pal Eddie Quong is holding a rod on you. He shoots a fast bullet, Eddie does."

"Lay another hand on Petal and I'll risk it," Lee Yin Sam answered darkly. "You can't—"

"Oh, can't I, though? That's where you're wrong. She's still my wife, I told you. Her marriage to you isn't legal, now that I'm back in circulation." Bo Chang's thin lips quirked. "To take her away from you, all I have to do is show myself around town and re-establish my identity."

"You wouldn't dare. You'd lay yourself wide open to a murder charge."

"Wrong again, Sammy Lee. Who's to prove I bumped off the guy they buried in my grave?"

"You just confessed it."

Bo Chang giggled. "Not officially. I mentioned it to you, sure. But if you

squealed to the cops, would they believe you? No. You haven't got a shred of evidence to back it up. I would deny I ever said any such thing. The coppers would think you were just trying to frame me, railroad me, get me out of the way so you could stay married to my wife."

"Why, you filthy—"

"All the sympathy would be on my side, chum." Bo Chang paused to drink again from the bottle. "I've got a story all cooked up to explain everything. A year ago I was conked, robbed of my clothes. I woke up in a strange town with a bad case of amnesia. For twelve long months I've been wandering up and down the Pacific Coast, not knowing who I was, not knowing my own name. Then, today, all of a sudden, bingo—my memory comes back!"

The wily Oriental chuckled at the picture he was painting. "I head for home, and what do I find? My wife married to another man, a man I used to work with at the oyster cannery, a man I thought was my pal. My life is ruined. I'm a heartbroken Oriental Enoch Arden and everybody will feel sorry for me. Yeah."

Outdoors, dusk was thickening, but it could not possibly match the bleak, cold darkness that was creeping into the heart of Lee Yin Sam. It is written that despair is a dragon with many mouths. That dragon was now gnawing at Lee Yin Sam's vitals, draining him of hope.

"What is it you want?" he asked through clenched teeth. "What are you after? Why have you come here with this—this gunsel companion? What is your game?"

Bo Chang lifted an indolent shoulder. "Perhaps I merely want to claim the wife who belongs to me, the woman who is mine by prior right."

"No!" Fragrant Peach Petal whimpered. "No, I won't go back to you. I . . . I'd sooner die!"

Ignoring her, Bo Chang continued suavely: "Or, on the other hand, maybe it's money I'm after. That fifteen grand I picked up at fan-tan in Frisco's Chinatown didn't last forever, you know. Eddie Quong helped me spend it. Now he's helping me get more."

"Money," Lee Yin Sam said. "So that's how you think of Petal: a chattel, an object for barter, a slave to be sold for cash."

BO CHANG'S leer was taunting. "It is a good old solid Chinese concept, the selling of women. And we are Chinese. Do I hear you making an offer, Sammy? After all, you will lose much face if I show myself around town and take her away from you. You'll be disgraced, humiliated—"

"I am not Chinese. I am American!" Lee Yin Sam broke in with harsh pride. "I was born here. I am a citizen. I fought for this country as a soldier in the war. I enlisted voluntarily, because this country is my country. Don't call me Chinese. And don't talk to me about losing face. That's an Oriental way of thinking, and I don't think like an Oriental. Therefore I don't believe in the buying and selling of women. Fragrant Peach Petal is not an animal to be beaten, to be offered at auction."

Bo Chang laid down his gun long enough to clap his palms in mocking applause. "A noble speech, Sammy Lee. Does it mean you refuse to put in a bid for the little lady?" Then he stood up, went around the table, hauled Petal into his arms and mashed her mouth with cruel, questing lips.

She wailed, tried to struggle free. And Lee Yin Sam, with Eddie Quong's gun boring at his backbone, could do nothing but stand and watch in helpless fury, knowing that if he made a move to aid the girl he loved, he would be slain. And it is written that death is a cage through whose bars no man can reach back toward life.

He must not die, he told himself. He must not allow himself to be murdered now. For while he lived, there was always hope of triumph over his enemies. Therefore he stood and watched with sickened eyes as Bo Chang kissed the squirming girl and ran intimately esurient fingers over her body.

"Stop it!" Lee Yin Sam panted.

Bo Chang looked at him. "Oho. Ready to make a bid, after all, are you?"

"No, not a bid. Call it blackmail, call it extortion, call it a shakedown payoff. That's what it really is. You

want money. If I pay, you'll leave without making trouble. All right. We've got a hundred and fifty dollars that we've been saving to buy a new stove. I'll get it for you. Take it and get out."

Behind Lee Yin Sam, raucous laughter sounded. "A hundred and fifty bucks!" Eddie Quong said. "Hey, Bo Chang, listen at the guy! A measley hundred and fifty bucks he offers us to scram and leave him to go on living with your wife! Ain't that a kick?"

"It's all I have," Lee Yin Sam's voice was thick. "A man doesn't save much out of the salary he earns trucking oyster shells to the crushing plant."

Bo Chang nodded. "Chicken feed. That's a joke, Sammy. Laugh at it. Chicken feed. You truck oyster shells to the plant that crushes them and bags them for sale to chicken farmers. Hens eat the stuff for the calcium. It makes the egg shells stronger. Chicken feed is what you haul in the truck and chicken feed is what the oyster cannery pays you. Funny, eh?" Bo Chang's tone was far from mirthful. "Speaking of salary, Sammy—tomorrow is payday at the cannery, isn't it? Or have they changed it since I worked there?"

"They haven't changed it. Tomorrow we get our wages."

"And they still draw the dough out of the bank the day before payday? That would be today."

SUDDENLY, Lee Yin Sam grew tense, sensing what was coming. "Yes."

"They made up the payroll this afternoon and put it in little envelopes and put the envelopes in that rickety old cheesebox they call a safe?"

"Yes. But—"

"And when the canning season is heavy and there's more shells to be hauled away than you can handle in the daytime, do you still go down to the plant at night to load your truck for an early start on your first morning haul?"

"Sometimes," Lee Yin Sam admitted uneasily.

Bo Chang chuckled once more. "Good. Then you've got a key to the main gate."

"Yes," Lee Yin Sam said quickly. "But not to the building itself. There-

fore you—”

“That’s no problem. I’ll get into the building, once I’m past the gate and inside the fence. Doors can be forced. And that safe I could open blindfolded with one hand tied behind me. It’s going to be easy, Sammy—almost too easy. There ought to be at least a couple of G’s in that cheesebox, maybe more. And you’ll help me to get it, chum.”

“No!”

“It’s a cheap price to pay, considering what you stand to gain. Eddie and I will lam with the loot and you’ll have your precious Petal all to yourself. As far as the world knows, I’m dead—and I stay dead. You’ll never see me again, never have to make another hush-money payoff. Yeah, it’s a plenty cheap price, considering it comes out of the cannery’s pocket and not yours.”

“I am no thief. I won’t—”

Again Bo Chang seized the trembling, terrified girl who once had been his wife. This time he wrenched her arms around in back of her and applied torturing pressure, so that she moaned in sudden pain. “This is just a sample, Sammy. Get obstinate and she’ll suffer a lot more. And you’ll watch while she suffers, pal. You’ll see things you won’t enjoy looking at.”

“You foul son of an unspeakable tortoise!” Lee Yin Sam panted wildly.

“But that won’t be all,” Bo Chang said. “When it’s over, I’ll shoot her dead before your eyes, and I’ll rake your face with her fingernails so it will look like you beat her, bruised her, and she tried to fight back. I’ll plant your fingerprints on the gun I kill her with, then knock you unconscious and leave you alongside her corpse. I’ll tip the cops—anonimously, of course. You’ll be arrested for murdering her, Sammy. You’ll go to the cyanide chamber.”

Fragrant Peach Petal moaned again. Then, bravely, she wailed: “Don’t give in to him, O my husband! The thought of death does not frighten me. Better that I be killed than for you to become a criminal’s accomplice! Better that you be convicted of murdering me, and executed. At least we shall be together.” The words lifted to a scream of agony as Bo Chang wrenched at her arms.

“Ai-ee-ee—!”

It was more than Lee Yin Sam could endure. Sweat streamed off his forehead into his smarting, anguished eyes. “Stop it!” he yelled. “Let go of her and I shall do whatever you command. Only let her go!”

“Now you’re being sensible,” Bo Chang said. Outside, the night had come, starless and overcast, black as a dead man’s shroud.

THE car that Bo Chang and Eddie

Quong had parked behind Lee Yin Sam’s cottage was a small decrepit sedan whose faltering motor and paper-thin tires confirmed that the two criminals were indeed desperate for funds. The scar-faced Quong drove, with Fragrant Peach Petal and Lee Yin Sam wedged beside him on the front seat so that Bo Chang, in the rear, could keep his pistol trained on them. Running without lights, the sedan drifted downhill, skirted the town proper and came at last to the waterfront and the cannery.

Under a menacing gun-muzzle, Lee Yin Sam unlocked the entrance gate for the car to roll into the cannery yard, then guided it through stygian shadows to a vast shed in back of the main building whose open end faced closely upon the ocean.

“Here your vehicle will be sheltered from prying eyes,” he explained in a whisper as the sedan braked to a crunching halt under the shed’s slanted roof. He was acutely conscious of his bride’s unspoken protest at his apparent eagerness to cooperate with his captors, but he had no way of signaling to her in the darkness—no means of letting her know that his abject surrender was a sham.

He sensed that she thought him a coward, but he did not dare tell her the meaning of the crunching noise made by the sedan’s worn tires. He could only go forward with the scheme that was in his mind—a forlorn, last-ditch plan which might prove worthless even if successful.

Beyond the shed, a wharf jutted spiderlike into the sea. On either side of it, like ghost fingers stiffly reaching, bare masts arose from a small fleet of

fishing smacks moored to the narrow wooden pier, while strings of oyster-tongers' dories bumped and rubbed hollownly together on the restless ground-swell. The air was damp, brackish with the smell of kelp and brine, the unmistakable odor of opened oyster shells heaped in dark mounds around the shed. Bo Chang emerged from the sedan's tonneau like a furtive, carrion crab.

"Okay, Eddie," he said to Quong at the wheel. "You stay here with the babe. If she tries to get away or lets out a yip, croak her. Not with your rod, though. It is too noisy. A knife is just as quick and a lot quieter."

"Yeah. I get you."

Bo Chang jammed his gun against Lee Yin Sam's ribs. "Let's go, sucker. And remember, don't give me trouble or Petal gets her gullet slit. Understand?"

"I understand and obey. I have no other choice."

They moved, then, around the side of the shed to the cannery. Through a window you could see dim night-light inside, casting weird reflections on gleaming steam vats of stainless steel and huge, burnished copper pressure cookers.

The walls were spotless white tile, the oyster-opening tables long and trough-shaped with conveyor belts stretching toward the grading, sorting and inspection stations, thence to the canning machinery. Daytimes it was a place that hummed with activity, like some hospital-immaculate beehive. Tonight it was as silent and still as a morgue. Lee Yin Sam shivered.

"Scared, Sammy?" Bo Chang taunted him.

"It is written that the time must come to every man when fear is useless. I am no longer frightened—I am resigned."

"The stoic Asiatic," Bo Chang sneered. "Give me your coat."

"My coat?"

"Come on, hurry. Take it off."

QUICKLY, Lee Yin Sam shrugged out of the shabby garment and handed it over. Bo Chang wadded it around his automatic, went to the side door of the cannery, aimed at its lock and fired. Muffled by many thicknesses

of cloth, the report was a dull flat cough followed by tinkling metal. The door sagged open.

"In we go," Bo Chang said, and prodded Lee Yin Sam toward the plant's business offices, stopping along the way to pick up two oyster knives from the processing tables. The knives had strong, thin steel blades, with handles of thick heavy metal. Reaching the company safe, Bo Chang slipped the blade of one knife behind the combination knob and wedged it there, then handed the other knife to Lee Yin Sam. "Strike. And strike hard."

Using the weighted handle of the second knife as a maul, Lee Yin Sam hit the first one a muscular blow. The knurled combination knob flew off the face of the safe.

"You'd make a good yegg," Bo Chang chuckled. "Though a child could peter this ancient box. Now thrust the blade of your knife into the shaft-hole. That's it. Pry back and forth. Ah! Hear the clicks? One more time. Hurry. That did it!" His slanted eyes glittered as the iron door swung outward on its hinges. "Now reach in and get me those packets of pay envelopes. All of them."

Speaking, he leaned as if by accident against the safe's door. Lee Yin Sam had to put up a hand and push it away to keep it from knocking him off-balance. Then, obediently, he hauled out the payroll cash.

Bo Chang, dropping the coat he had used as a silencer for his automatic, stuffed the bundles into the pockets of his suit. "Now we go out. You've done a good job, thus far."

"Have I?" Lee Yin Sam asked meekly. But in his mind he wondered if he had perhaps done a better job than Bo Chang suspected. In another moment, he would know for sure. He walked ahead of his captor's gun, out of the cannery and around to the rear shed.

There, Eddie Quong was tense with anger. Reckless of risk, the scar-faced one had switched on the sedan's weak yellow headlamps. Now, standing alongside the car with his own .32 still covering Fragrant Peach Petal, his mouth was twisted with excitement as Bo Chang and Lee Yin Sam appeared.

"Near time you was showing up!"

he rasped. "Our getaway is all bungled up! Look at our tires. Two of 'em flat, cut to ribbons by these accursed sharp oystershells. And us with only one spare. It cooks us!"

Bo Chang drew a hissing breath and glared malevolently at Lee Yin Sam. "If I thought you deliberately steered us onto the shells to slash our tires—"

"It never entered my thoughts," Lee Yin Sam tried to make his voice sound craven, though his heart was pounding with hope. "Why should I wish to detain you? What good would it do me?"

"Maybe you figured to get in touch with the cops."

"How could I? No, Bo Chang. On the contrary I want you to go away, far away, and fast! Never to return. How could I guess anything like this would happen?" He looked around. "After all, do I not drive my dump truck over these shells every day? This is where I load. I forgot to consider that the truck's tires are more substantial, with heavy duty treads."

Bo Chang followed the direction of Lee Yin Sam's glance. "Ah. The dump truck! All loaded and ready to roll!"

"Oh, no! You can't—"

"Quiet, sucker. What's the matter? Sorry you called my attention to it? Regretting you played right into my hands by giving me the idea?"

Lee Yin Sam gulped audibly. "Not that. But the truck is—is in need of repair."

"You mean something's wrong with the motor?"

"No, not the motor. But—"

"Quit lying!" Bo Chang snarled. "If the motor's okay the truck will run. Right?"

"Well—yes."

"That's all I want to know. Come on, into the cab with you."

"You want me to take the wheel?"

"And have you wreck us by steering into a ditch? Oh no! I'll do the driving, smart guy. You and Petal get in the middle. Eddie Quong will sit on the other side. If you try to pull anything swift, he knows what to do about it."

"Knife, eh?" Quong grinned.

"Or gun. It won't matter, once we're on the road." Bo Chang's habitual chuckle now held evil satisfaction. "This

is going to be better than I planned it in the first place. No coppers are going to look for a couple of lammisters in a dump truck loaded with oyster shells. A fast getaway car they might stop. But a slow heavy-tonnage outfit they won't give a second glance. It's perfect!"

MOMENTS later, as the huge vehicle lumbered out upon the highway, Lee Yin Sam felt Fragrant Peach Petal shivering against him, crowded close to his body and silently weeping. He tried to comfort her with an answering pressure of his knee, but it was difficult to console her without words. And the only words he dared speak were weakening phrases, the abject mouthing of counterfeited cowardice—addressed, not to her but to Bo Chang.

"Is it not time that you released us?" he pleaded. "You have everything you demanded. The payroll money. A means of escape. I have done all you asked. Now live up to your word. Let us go back to our cottage."

"Fat chance!" Bo Chang snapped. "Do you think I'd let you remain alive after all you know about me? Hah! When we get a hundred miles or so up the coast you'll be knocked on the head, dumped in the ocean just like I did that other sucker a year ago. Only you'll be weighted with rocks so you won't float up for somebody to find you, later."

"But—but—"

"You'll disappear, see? And your fingerprints are on the door of the cannery safe where you shoved it away when I pushed it toward you. Your coat is on the office floor, with bullet holes in it to show how you shot off the outside lock. The dough is stolen. The cops will figure you pulled the job and scrambled with Petal."

"I see. And Petal? What of her?"

Bo Chang leered. "There are places that'll pay as much as two or three hundred dollars for a girl as pretty as she is. Maybe more. She's like cash in the bank."

"So you still think of her as a chattel, a slave to be sold. The kind of slavery that—"

Eddie Quong broke in. "Quiet! There's a cop car back of us, flashing

his red light!" He twisted around, peered through the cab's rear window. "Speed this thing! He's gaining on us, coming fast! How do you suppose he spotted us? What's the gimmick? Come on, let's have speed!"

"Speed? In a loaded truck?" Bo Chang hunched over the wheel. "Don't be a fool, Eddie. Let him come. Let him draw alongside and I'll fix him."

Siren-song lifted in the night as the highway patrol car drew abreast, flashed its crimson spotlight toward the truck cab. Bo Chang took one hand off the wheel, thrust his automatic over the sill of his rolled-down window and snapped a shot, blindly.

The red spotlight shattered, went out. Bo Chang fired another slug, and the black and white police sedan widened away—went into a careening, sickening skid that turned it end-for-end, headed in the opposite direction, its tortured tires screaming like ten thousand devils.

"That gives us a breather!" Bo Chang panted. "I'm ditching this crate. We'll run for it. And if we don't make it that way, we'll shoot our way clear!" He twisted the heavily laden hydraulic dump truck toward the side of the road, sent it crashing over a shallow ditch, made a wide circle in the field beyond and presently fought it to a halt with its radiator facing the road and its body tilted at an angle.

Eddie Quong already had his door open. "Let's get going! The cops are on their way again. I can see them running this way!"

"Wait." Bo Chang reached past Lee Yin Sam, grabbed at Fragrant Peach Petal's dress and savagely ripped it, tore a wide strip of cloth from it. Working fast, he used the strip to fasten her left wrist tightly to Lee Yin Sam's right. Then he knotted the remaining length of cloth to a power control lever arising from the floorboards.

CAUTIOUSLY, Bo Chang leaned out of the cab and triggered three rapid shots at the oncoming State cops. They broke, scattered. He laughed and leaped to the ground. "Now if they do any shooting, they'll aim at the cab. And if they hit anybody it'll be Sammy Lee.

Or the dame. Or both."

"But what about us?" Eddie Quong wheezed.

"We'll take cover. When the coppers start firing, we'll pick them off by aiming for their gun flashes. Come on."

Lee Yin Sam raised his voice. "Bo Chang—wait—I beg you! Let me say something—let me warn you not to use the back of the truck for a shield—"

"Oh. You'd like us to stay out in the open and get drilled, eh? Wise guy!" Bo Chang reached in, struck Lee Yin Sam across the face with his gun-muzzle. "Thanks for telling me where to find a good barricade. Sucker!" Then he and Eddie Quong raced around, crouched down behind the truck's tail gate.

The highway patrolmen started shooting. There were two of them from the wrecked cruiser, and they were creeping forward through thick, fog-tendriled darkness. Lee Yin Sam heard answering gunfire. He heard Fragrant Peach Petal whimpering alongside him. He heard a sudden lethal buzzing as a police bullet, hornet-like, blasted into the truck cab.

Then he heard something else—a quiet whirring, a creaking of mechanism, a crunchy clatter of movement, growing to a roar. And, abruptly, two shrill screams.

Fragrant Peach Petal stiffened. "Sammy—what is it?"

"Justice, beloved," he said. He wrenched at the knotted cloth that fettered his wrist and broke it. Then, very carefully, he jumped from the far side of the cab and stole toward the truck's rear. His movements were concealed by the bulky dump body, which tilted at a forty degree angle, its forward end raised high by the hydraulic hoist and its tail gate dangling open. And behind the massive vehicle, now emptied of its cargo, there was an immense heavy pile of oyster shells.

"Hola! Police!" Lee Yin Sam loudly called. "Come quickly, for I have trapped you a pair of rats!"

Then he attacked the shell pile with his bare hands—burrowed toward a faint groaning which seeped from somewhere under that crushing weight. By the time the patrolmen came up with

their guns and their flashlights, Lee Yin Sam had uncovered one dead man—Eddie Quong. And he had freed the head of a Bo Chang who was still feebly breathing.

"So you are yet alive!" Lee Yin Sam said. "That is good, for it is written that a criminal's punishment is intensified tenfold when he knows the means whereby he was caught."

"Get me—out of here—the weight is caving in my chest—my ribs—"

"As you richly deserve. But first you shall listen. Today, I received a traffic citation for operating a truck with a load of shells and a defective hoist control. As I drove, the constant jolting caused the hoist to function. The dumping mechanism raised the truck body a few inches, and the tail gate cracked open. I scattered oystershells along the highway, and oystershells are a hazard. They are sharp. They cut ordinary tires. I did not know this was happening until two State patrolmen stopped me, gave me a ticket and sent me back to the cannery to have the truck repaired for tomorrow."

"My chest—"

NOT to be denied his moment of well-earned triumph, Lee Yin Sam continued:

"And so, tonight, when you threatened my life and the life of my bride, I used this defective truck as a weapon and a snare, a trap. When you robbed the cannery safe, I had you drive your own car across sharp oystershells to ruin your tires. Then, by crafty words, I put an idea into your murderous mind and planted the seeds of your own self-destruction. It was a simple idea—the idea of employing a loaded dump truck

for a getaway car."

"You sneaking, dirty—"

"I knew that the truck would scatter shells on the roadway. I knew this would cause us to be pursued by the first passing police car. I hoped that in your surprise you would submit meekly to arrest. I was wrong about that part. But I had additional ammunition. I had many shells. Oystershells. As effective as cartridge shells, if properly used.

"When you leaped from the cab, I begged you not to make a stand behind the truck, knowing you would do exactly that. You tied me to the hoist-control lever, which, being imperfect in operation, is like a hair trigger. A jolt, a tiny movement, causes the mechanism to start. You moved it when you fastened me to it. Then you took shelter in the very spot where tons of shells would be dumped upon you. Now you are finished."

Bo Chang's eyes were glazing, his breath stertorous. "Get me out—I'm dying—"

"Will you confess to robbing the cannery? Will you confess to the murder you committed a year ago?"

Hysterically, Bo Chang started screaming, babbling out a shrill stream of words that would damn him. Then Lee Yin Sam and the two patrolmen dug him out of the shell mound, a broken, misshapen caricature of what once had been a man and a killer.

Lee Yin Sam looked gravely at the two officers. "With your permission, sirs, I would like to go now to my bride," he said. "She has had a difficult time, and I want to take her home."

They nodded in unison. For it is written that even the men of the law recognize the rights of a bridegroom.



"GET OUT OF TOWN"

If Nick Fenner had heeded the warning of that beautiful girl he might have avoided—

FRAME-UP IN FRISCO

An Exciting Novelet by PHILIP KETCHUM
Coming in Our Next Action-Packed Issue!



When a bookkeeper

MR. MUNN reached home every night at 6:42, except for the last day of the month when he had to stay overtime and close the books. Then, he came home later, but never later than 9:30. He didn't like missing his regular evening train. He had no one to talk to on the way out, it was dark when he reached the station, and the long walk home was lonely.

He could, of course, have had Edna,

his wife, come down with the car and pick him up, but he felt that might make him look as if he were afraid of the dark. Which was absurd. There had never been any crime in Fairhaven, not even a burglary, except that one time several years ago when a madman had terrorized the women of the neighborhood for a few days. He had been caught before he had harmed anyone.

Each time he reached the corner of

By WILLIAM DEGENHARD



Munn heard the gun as it spat—
like a quick, sharp snap of a
stick on leather

No Hero Is MR. MUNN

sees murder done, a killer's likely to find that his accounts are payable!

Maple Street and Freemont Road on those late evenings, he had a decision to make. He could turn left and go up along Freemont Road, which was lighted, or he could cut across the vast empty lot and save himself a few minutes. He always chose to save the few minutes.

True, he had to admit to himself that the rustling of the weeds and the twisted, grotesque shapes of the shad-

owy bushes made him a little nervous. But there was no sidewalk along Freemont Road and, even though there were streetlamps, it was downright dangerous to walk along there, the way people drove so recklessly these days.

He hesitated a little longer than usual this evening, for it had rained around noon and the ground was wet and he knew there would be small puddles along the way. But the path was fairly wide

and he knew approximately where he'd find the bad spots, so he finally decided not to upset his established habit.

As soon as he was away from the dim streetlights, he found that, even though there was no moon and no stars, he still could see a considerable distance ahead. He felt vaguely triumphant as he came to the first spot, edged his toe out, felt the slippery mud, then cautiously went around on the grass at the side of the path.

HE STOPPED short, startled, wondering what had startled him. He was aware his heart was thumping a bit harder than usual. His head cocked and he listened intently, but he could hear only the chirping of the crickets, the dry rustling of the weeds in the soft evening breeze. He looked over his shoulder and tried to smile. He was glad, at times like these, that no one was around to see him. He knew he was, in some respects, a very foolish man.

He stepped forward, stopped again, the skin along his arms crawling. Voices! He was sure he could hear voices somewhere in the darkness just ahead. And yet, why should that frighten him? Almost everybody who lived over this way used this short-cut to the station.

Now he listened again, but the voices didn't seem to be approaching him. He knew he had been hurrying along. He must have caught up with some other people who had arrived on the same train. He chided himself for his foolishness and went on.

For the third time, he stopped—quite involuntarily. This time, he could see two shadowy figures—two men. One was tall and slim, the other a vague blob a half a head shorter. Their voices were held low, yet the tone made it clear that they were quarreling.

Mr. Munn felt a confused feeling go through him. His impulse was to turn around and go back. He didn't like trouble. He would always walk around it if he could. And yet, it seemed a bit

silly to go all the way back and around the long way just because he had run into two men having an argument.

On the other hand, in a community like this, everybody knew everybody else and it might be embarrassing to them to be caught like this. The discreet thing was to withdraw as quickly as possible.

He wanted to turn around, but somehow he couldn't. The quarreling voices were growing louder, but the words jumbled together so he couldn't catch what it was all about. He felt a growing discomfort. He seemed to know those voices, especially the high-pitched one, but somehow he couldn't place them.

Then suddenly, the smaller man stepped back. The tall man cried out, lunged forward and the two men wrestled around and around. Distressed, Mr. Munn wanted to cry out and tell them to stop it. He couldn't find his voice. The two men went down, struggling, thrashing around in the grass.

Almost at once, the tall man jumped up, wheeled and started running up the path, away from Mr. Munn, he saw with relief. The smaller man was up a split second later. He stood very straight, lifting his arm, as if pointing with his finger. With horror, Mr. Munn realized that he was not pointing a finger. In his hand, there was a gun.

The gun spat—like a sharp, quick slap of a stick on leather. The tall man stopped abruptly, stiffened, stood very still for a long, agonized moment. Then, slowly, his knees buckled and he vanished into the tall grass.

Mr. Munn was paralyzed, his throat muscles so tight he felt as if a brutal hand had clamped over his windpipe and was choking out his breath. The small man's arm dropped to his side and he stood motionless a long time, staring at the spot where the other had disappeared.

Everything inside of Mr. Munn seemed to be straining, waiting for a slight groan, a slight noise in the grass,

a glimpse of a movement to tell him the fallen man was still alive. Nothing stirred in the deep, oppressive hush. Slowly, through the storm raging in his head, Mr. Munn became conscious of what he was striving not to think about. He had just witnessed a murder.

The thought made him start and a small, involuntary cry escaped him. The man with the gun wheeled, straightened, and a curse exploded on his lips. With horror, Mr. Munn saw the man's arm slowly raise.

FOR once in his life, he didn't think. He just acted. He spun half around, started running, frantically, desperately, sure at any moment he would trip and fall on his face. He heard a hoarse shout behind him, the crackling of weeds and dead branches. The sounds spurred him on. He felt his hat slide from his head, grabbed out for it. It slipped from his fingers. He didn't dare stop for it. He didn't look back. He kept running, running, faster than he had ever run before in his life.

Vaguely, he saw he was running toward Freemont Road. Vaguely, he realized he had been running toward the streetlights. He tried to get himself to change course, seek the safety of the darkness and the cover of some bushes. But reason had been swept aside by his terror. He couldn't think. He could just keep running.

He burst out of the field and onto the road. Only then, when the man called out to him, did he know for sure the man was still behind him, still coming after him. He raced across the road, plunged into the thick copse of trees, stumbled, almost fell. But he regained his balance and kept going.

He tripped, fell flat on his face, scrambled to his knees and crabbed over under the shelter of a thick bush. He forced himself by sheer will power to stop panting, to lie still and quiet. He could hear the man running back and forth in the brush, mumbling, cursing. Mr. Munn closed his eyes and prayed—harder than

he had ever prayed before.

"I know you, Munn!" came a shout from nearby. "If you open your mouth about this, I'll kill you, too. I swear I'll kill you!"

Then, silence. Mr. Munn could feel an ache flowing through every nerve and muscle in his body. He wanted to cry. He didn't dare move, or even breathe hard. He wondered why this had had to happen to him.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there. Finally, he found his strength again. Slowly, cautiously, he stood up. The murderer was gone. He tried to remember what the voice had sounded like. He knew he wouldn't be able to recognize the man again.

He came back to the road. All was still. He was sure now the killer had gone. He stood there, knowing he ought to turn back and go straight to the village and report this to the police.

The police! The word roused a vague new terror inside of him. He could see himself being questioned and badgered and perhaps jailed as a material witness—if they believed his story. If not, if it developed that he might have had some reason to kill—He turned swiftly and walked rapidly up the road toward home. He needed time, time to think, time to decide what to do.

There were lights along the street of small homes where Mr. Munn lived. He was almost up to his door before he realized he must be a mess. He paused and brushed himself off as best he could. His head ached a little. He knew he was late. What was he going to tell Edna?

She wasn't in the hall to meet him as he came in. He was relieved. Quickly, he hung up his topcoat in the hall closet. He didn't have that to explain. He wouldn't have to explain right away about the loss of his hat.

"That you, Harold?" came the call from the back of the house. "I'm in the kitchen."

His hands were dirty and he was tempted to go upstairs to the bathroom

first and wash up. He decided he'd better not. He always washed in the kitchen when he came home nights. She appeared at the kitchen door as he came across the dining room.

"I made waffles." She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I knew you'd want a snack before going to bed. You look tired, Harold. Have any trouble?"

He smiled wanly. "No more than usual. We had to track down a ten-dollar overcharge. We found it."

He shed his coat and went to the sink and washed his hands. Vaguely, he could smell the waffles. Somehow, he wasn't hungry. But, perhaps after a good cup of hot coffee—He avoided her eyes as he went over and seated himself in the breakfast nook.

"Anything wrong?" she asked suddenly.

"No, nothing wrong," he said firmly.

There was a long silence. She was suspicious, of course. He knew he couldn't avoid forever telling her what happened. She knew him too well to attempt to lie.

EDNA placed the plate with the waffle on it before him, and stood there, sullenly staring down at him. He felt a strange prickling sensation along his neck.

"You're a little late," she said finally. He tried to say something, but couldn't. "There's a scratch on your cheek, Harold."

His hand leaped to his cheek and he could feel the broken skin. It was only a surface scratch.

"Harold, something happened—something serious."

She sat down opposite him. He couldn't meet her eyes. He tried to eat his waffle. It was tasteless. Finally, "Please, Edna. It wasn't anything. The wind blew off my hat. I chased it. I fell and scratched myself."

She was silent a moment, then, quietly, "There's no wind out tonight—not enough to—"

"My hat blew off!" he burst out an-

grily. "I fell. That's all there was to it."

She didn't say any more. She rose and got him a cup of coffee. He didn't look her way. He could hear her bustling around, cleaning the mixmaster and the dishes. The coffee was bitter.

The telephone rang. He jumped and his hand hit against his cup. The coffee spilled into his lap and he quickly got up, grabbing for paper napkins and brushing himself off. She didn't come to help him. She just stood there, staring. In the hall, the telephone kept ringing and ringing.

She started, hurried out. A moment later, he could hear her answering the phone. He listened intently, but he couldn't catch what was being said. He sat down again, mechanically wiping up the spilled coffee on the table. He grew tense inside as he heard her coming back.

She stopped in the doorway and he could see she was white faced. She gazed steadily at his hand. He closed his fist hard, only now noticing he had been visibly trembling.

"It was Madge Fuller," she said in a low voice. "George was coming across the lot and he found—he found Pete, the handyman. He's dead. He was murdered."

He sat very still. He didn't say anything. His throat felt painfully dry. He was aware of a faint twitching sensation on his eyelids.

"Harold." Her voice was calm and quiet. "Harold, you came across that lot tonight."

He jumped up. "I went ar—" He caught himself. He knew he couldn't lie to her. "Yes, I came across the lot. I saw it. I saw him killed."

"You didn't report it to the police," she said in a dull voice. "You don't intend to."

"I can't!" he burst out. "They may think I did it. They may put me in jail as a material witness. Edna, I can't get myself involved."

"You have to go to the police," she said. "Harold, it's your duty."

He sat down slowly, his heart pounding. Yes, it was his duty. It was the duty of all honest, respectable citizens to go at once to the police if they knew anything about a crime. But—

"Edna, I want to go to the police. I want to do the right thing. But—"

She didn't say anything. She just stared at him.

"He saw me, Edna," he said in a low voice. "I didn't recognize him, but he chased me out to Freemont Road and I passed under a streetlight. He saw me. He knows who I am. He told me if I told anybody about it, he would come and kill me, too. Edna, do you want me to risk—?"

He stopped. He realized he sounded cowardly. He saw suddenly that he had already damaged himself by delaying going to the police. The longer he delayed, the more they would suspect that he had something to hide. And yet—A picture of the man with the gun rose before his eyes. He felt a shiver go through him.

"I don't know what to do, Edna," he said miserably. "If I knew who the man was, if I could identify him and be sure he'd be thrown into jail right away. But this way—"

"Yes." There was the tightness of fear in her voice. "Yes, I understand. I wish I knew what was right."

She turned away and was gone. He heard her go upstairs and close the bedroom door. He sat there, staring into space, aware his hands were cold and clammy, his brow was beaded with sweat.

He gasped as he remembered his hat. His hat was still out there. The police would surely search the lot thoroughly. If they found his hat— There were initials in it. They'll surely be able to trace it to him. He jumped up and snatched up his jacket and pulled it on. He had to find that hat.

The news had spread through the neighborhood like a flash fire. Doors all up and down the street were open and people were standing on their stoops, gazing down toward Freemont Road as

if they could see something. A number of men and women were hurrying down the street and their voices were sharp and clear in the still night air.

Mr. Munn now felt encouraged. In the dark and the confusion, he had a good chance to recover his hat without being noticed. He knew just where to start. He would backtrack from the place where he had come out on the road.

SOARING so high, his hopes died abruptly as he came within sight of the lot. The police had arrived in force. Squad cars from town were parked along the street and down on the road. Grey clad State Troopers had come, too, and were patrolling the lot. They carried big flashlights and they were chasing out the curious who wanted to get in close to the knot of men standing around the spot where the body had been found.

Mr. Munn felt a strange numbness creeping through him. The thought nagged him to go straight over, identify himself and tell his story. He couldn't force himself. He walked slowly down to the road, not consciously avoiding the many who were standing around and talking in low tones, yet keeping a safe distance from anyone who might recognize him and draw him into the discussion.

He headed straight for the lamp under which he had run in his escape from the killer. He tensed inside as he saw a fat little man waddling toward him. It was Salvatore, the barber down at the station. A pang of fright went through him. Salvatore took bets on the horses. Twice, Mr. Munn had bet on horses, just for a lark, the thrill in it.

Perhaps it was foolish of him even to think the police would read any significance into such a minor breaking of the law, yet one could never tell. A thing like that could be inflated beyond all reason at a time like this. He felt it best to avoid the stout little barber, to obviate the necessity of having Salvatore see how nervous he was and perhaps

start thinking.

He glanced around, saw that two men were standing under that streetlamp—the Rev. Dr. Jordan Browne, the pastor of the neighborhood church, and Warren Fostner, the principal deacon and chief of the Volunteer Fire Company. Mr. Munn felt he would be safe in their company. With satisfaction, he saw that Salvatore had stopped and looked hesitant to join the trio.

Fostner glanced around, nodded greeting. "Hello, Munn. Doctor Browne and I were just discussing the advisability of getting up a committee to patrol the streets after dark. You heard, didn't you? That madman who terrorized the neighborhood a few years back escaped from the insane asylum a few weeks ago."

Mr. Munn's eyes widened. "No!"

Dr. Browne nodded solemnly. "The police were notified at the time—and they told me. But we decided to keep it quiet, for fear of alarming people needlessly. Perhaps it was a mistake."

"You'll do your part, won't you, Munn?" Fostner asked sternly.

Mr. Munn nodded weakly. "Of course."

He pictured himself patrolling the dark streets late at night. He would be armed, naturally. He wondered if he would be afraid. Then, it came to him that he wouldn't have to be afraid. No madman had committed this hideous crime. He and he alone knew that the murderer was someone who lived right here.

They talked about the dead man. There would be few tears shed for Pete, the handyman. He had fired furnaces, mowed lawns, washed windows and cars and done other odd jobs. No one had liked him very much.

He had never been reliable. He drank. And he hadn't been trusted, either, for many people reported he had stolen minor articles when he came into their cellars. He was always prowling around looking for liquor. The general agreement around the neighborhood had always been that Pete was worthless.

"But it's not for us to pass moral

judgment on the man," the pastor said. "I always felt Pete was a sick man. I'm sorry he would never let me try to help him."

They stood there, watching the proceedings without much understanding of what was going on. The ambulance that had been called was sent back. Other cars came in from the city and, soon after, the spot was lit up by flash-bulbs as photographers took pictures.

Munn was restless, almost in agony. Again and again, he was tempted to take Dr. Browne aside, tell him the story and ask his advice. Yet, what good would that do? He had seen the murder. But he couldn't help solve it, for he had not seen the killer. He wouldn't be able to identify him if he ever saw him again.

A State Trooper came out of the lot, heading straight for the spot where the three were standing. Mr. Munn felt himself shriveling inside and it took all his will power to prevent himself from turning and running away. His fists tightened until he could feel his nails digging into his palms.

"Doctor Browne?" the trooper called. "Could we talk to you a few minutes?"

The clergyman excused himself and hurried across the road to join the trooper. From the corner of his eye, Mr. Munn noticed that Salvatore, the barber, had turned away and was walking rapidly down the road. He relaxed inside, immediately tensed again as he realized his relieved sigh had been audible. He was acutely aware that Fostner was watching him narrowly.

"Munn."

THE voice startled him and he swung around, much too quickly. Fostner stepped back, so fast that his sleeve caught in a nail protruding from the wooden lamp pole. A patch of his sleeve ripped. Mr. Munn blinked, automatically loosened the sleeve and Fostner's arm dropped to his side. He smiled nervously as he met Fostner's eyes.

"This is making everybody jittery, isn't it," he heard himself say. "I—I'm sorry about the coat. Have it fixed and

I'll take care of the bill."

Fostner waved brusquely. "It was an accident. I guess I'm a little jittery myself. It's an old topcoat. I'm about ready to throw it out, anyway."

Mr. Munn looked at the gray coat without really seeing it. He knew Fostner's suspicion had been roused. He wondered if he shouldn't tell Fostner his story and ask his advice. He had never been intimate with Fostner, but he had always felt close to him. Fostner was an auditor, too, though his job was a big one with the giant Montano Chemical Company. Miserably, Mr. Munn decided he'd better keep silent. It was not hard to guess what the advice would be of the community's outstanding civic leader.

"I'd better get back home," he said finally.

Fostner nodded slowly. "Hanging around here isn't doing any good. But I'll wait for Doctor Browne. I'll get in touch with you later, Munn. I'll want you on our committee."

Mr. Munn mumbled he'd be willing to serve and moved off as quickly as he decently could. He felt angry with himself. He felt he had taken one more step toward his own doom. Fostner knew—almost everybody in town knew—that Mr. Munn came home late on the last day of each month. It was only a matter of time before someone would remember he had come in at 9:27 tonight, which would mean he had been walking home just about the time the murder took place.

He felt strangely exhausted as he closed the door behind him. Somehow, being in his house didn't seem to shut him off from the world. He felt as if he were in a stifling, narrow room, the walls slowly closing in on him.

Edna was in the kitchen. He hesitated, then went in. She was getting ready the evening's garbage.

"I'd rather not take it out myself tonight," she said in a low voice. She paused, then went on, "Freda called. She told me there's a rumor that a madman—" Her voice trailed off, then, al-

most hopefully, "It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes, he did escape from the asylum." He rubbed his forehead. "But I don't believe he's around here. I don't believe Pete was killed by a madman."

She came over and put her arms around him and kissed his cheek lightly.

"Harold, I'm not sorry you didn't go to the police. I don't want you to risk—" She broke off and she cried a little. "I guess we're both cowards, Harold. But I can't help it. I'd die myself if he—"

The doorbell cut her off. She stiffened, stepped back, and they looked at each other, stiff faced.

"I'll answer it," he said huskily.

HIS heart was pounding violently as he went to the front door. Through the small window, he could see two men standing outside on the stoop. The police. He was sure it was the police. He could feel himself trembling. He wanted to run upstairs, pretend nobody was home. But that was impossible. He had to face it.

He was surprised how calm he was when he opened the door.

"Yes?"

The short, squat man showed a badge. "I'm Detective Palanca. This is Detective Johnson. May we come in?"

"Of course, of course." Mr. Munn was conscious his voice was too loud. "In here, please—the living-room."

Edna was standing in the dining-room archway. She said nothing as her husband led the two men in and waved them to seats. He himself seated himself on the edge of the wing chair. His eyes flitted from one to the other of the detectives. They were looking around, eyeing him speculatively.

Mr. Munn cleared his throat. "I suppose—I guess you're investigating the—the killing. It's a shocking affair."

The squat detective nodded. "We understand you people hired Hogan for odd jobs once in a while."

"Hogan?" Mr. Munn echoed. "Was that his last name? We never knew. Everybody around here knew him only as Pete."

"When did you see him last?" Palanca asked.

Mr. Munn frowned into space. He was feeling good inside. He was sure his nervousness wasn't visible.

"Well—I can't say for sure. He seldom was around while I was home. I might have seen him some Saturday recently." He glanced at his wife. "Have you seen him lately, dear?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded scratchy. "Just last week he came to take up Mrs. Fuller's screens and wash them. We'll all be putting them up soon."

Palanca's eyes turned back to Mr. Munn. "What time did you come home tonight?"

Mr. Munn felt himself tightening inside. "Nine-thirty or so. I—I worked overtime at the office. I'm a bookkeeper. I had to close the books for the month."

"You didn't cross that lot?"

Mr. Munn felt a prickling in his cheeks. "No." He was acutely conscious his voice was too low.

Palanca glanced at his partner and nodded. Johnson got up and went outside. Mr. Munn watched, a horrible lump forming in the pit of his stomach. Johnson was back in a moment. In his hand was Mr. Munn's hat.

"Is that yours?" Palanca asked gruffly.

Mr. Munn stared at it and for one, long terrible moment he thought he wouldn't be able to speak. Finally, "Why, yes, it may be. I lost it—yesterday. It blew off my head as I was walking home from the station. It was dark and I— Well, I was going to go out Saturday in daylight and look for it."

"You lost it last night?"

"Yes."

"It rained around noon today."

There was a long, painful silence. Mr. Munn could feel beads of sweat forming on his brow. It was agony not to be able to wipe them away. He sat rigidly, his mouth tight.

"You wear a topcoat?" Palanca asked softly.

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"In the hall closet."

Johnson turned away without a word and went out into the hall. Mr. Munn glanced at his wife. Her face was stiff, her eyes a bit glazed. He thought she looked near the fainting point. But she caught his eyes and smiled feebly. A moment later, Johnson was back with the coat.

The two detectives spread it out on the floor. With horror, Mr. Munn saw there were burrs on it and a stain where he had fallen on moist ground.

"I ran for the train this morning. I fell as I crossed that lot down by the station."

Palanca glanced up, but he said nothing. Mr. Munn swore inwardly at himself. He should have kept his mouth shut.

Finally, Johnson grunted. "No sign of a tear. Besides, it isn't the right color. We're looking for a gray one."

"Yes." Palanca stood up, tossing the coat on the sofa. "What do you know about this, Munn?"

Mr. Munn's throat was tight, but he managed to get out, "Nothing, absolutely nothing. We're all— Naturally, we're all very upset about this. With a madman loose—"

He shriveled inside as he caught the contempt in the detective's eyes. He looked away quickly, cursing himself as he felt a flush mounting his cheeks.

"If your memory improves," Palanca said in a curt tone, "get in touch with us at once. Come on, Johnson."

The two went out and the door closed softly behind them. A muffled sob escaped Edna's lips and she hurried over to the couch and sat down. He sat back, staring sightlessly at the wall. Over and over, he kept telling himself: They knew he had lied. They suspected now that he was the murderer.

IN SUDDEN panic his eyes focused on his topcoat. He frowned slightly. They had looked it over with minute care. They had been looking for a tear. A tear! He sat upright, his heart racing. He remembered how the murderer

had struggled with Pete. The killer's coat must have been torn in the struggle. A small piece—perhaps only a thread—must have been found. So, they were looking for a topcoat—a gray topcoat.

Slowly, he rose from his chair, a curious tingling in his chest. A picture of Fostner tearing his coat rose before his eyes. Fostner's coat was gray! It was possible he had deliberately caught the cloth on that nail so that, if the tear was found later, he would have Mr. Munn as a witness to tell when and where the tear had occurred.

Yet, somehow, that seemed fantastic. Fostner, a murderer? Fostner had everything, a fine job, money, a good house, a nice family. He was the most civic minded man in the community, looked up to by everyone. Still, that coat—

"Edna."

Her head came up. "Yes, dear?"

"I think I'd better go to the police, after all."

She was silent a moment, then she nodded solemnly. "Yes, I've been thinking that, too. Harold, you're not safe even if you do keep quiet about this. You're a danger to him and always will be. He may kill you at any time to make sure you never talk."

He went over and kissed her lightly on the cheek. She was right. If he kept his silence, he would live constantly, day and night, in abject fear. He would be afraid of every shadow, every slight sound. He would never be able to lift his eyes. He would never be able to look straight at any of his neighbors. He would be condemning himself to a life of constant, nagging torture, the life of a cringing cur.

There was a curious elation in his heart as he went out into the night. But there was a doubt, too. He still couldn't make himself believe that Fostner was a murderer. Why would a man like Fostner want to kill a mere handyman, a bum? He realized if he went to the police with a story like that, he might be laughed out of the place and perhaps

get himself into more trouble. He might be accused to making up evil gossip to cover his own sins.

The neighborhood had quieted down again. Mr. Munn walked thoughtfully up and down, then turned and headed toward the better section of the neighborhood. That topcoat. He could use that as an excuse to visit Fostner. He could say he wanted to take it to town in the morning and have this torn spot rewoven at his expense. He would even insist.

If he could only get a thread from that coat, a small piece, then the police would have enough to be able to tell if the piece they found at the murder scene was the same. If it was, then Fostner had torn his coat uselessly in Mr. Munn's presence, for his reasoning would then prove to have been faulty.

Mr. Munn didn't meet a soul as he went up the street and turned the corner. Fostner lived in a beautiful little Colonial style house in the middle of the block, surrounded by four lots, giving him ample room around his home. There were lights in the bedroom upstairs, in the living room, and in the cellar.

Mr. Munn's heart was pounding wildly. If he had guessed right, this was dangerous, gravely dangerous. He walked by the house slowly, glancing up at the windows. The cellar windows. Why had Pete been killed?

It was true that Pete had had a bad habit of prowling through people's cellars. Suppose he had found something the owner had wanted to hide? A body, perhaps. A printing press turning out counterfeit money. He thought either of those were fantastic, yet he felt strongly that he was on the right track.

He paused at the corner, came back and could feel his courage oozing away. He kept telling himself he had to go in, he had to face this. His self respect was at stake. He had to go in or face a living hell for as long as he should live.

He steeled himself inside. His hands felt clammy as he turned up the path. His knees felt weak and he wanted to turn and run and reconsider. But he

told himself sternly that, for once in his life, he had to be a man.

He didn't go in. It occurred to him suddenly that he might not have to face Fostner, after all. There were lights on in the cellar. Perhaps he could see what he wanted to see through those windows. He glanced up nervously. Nothing was stirring. Not a sound anywhere. In quick, nervous steps he was across the lawn and kneeling at the cellar window.

DISAPPOINTED, he saw the front part of the house contained the playroom, fitted out with a bar and bridge tables and gayly decorated walls. He wasn't likely to find anything there. Quickly, he rose and went around toward the back.

The cellarway was open. For a brief instant, he considered going in. He dismissed the idea immediately as too dangerous. If he were caught, Fostner could shoot him and say he mistook him for the madman. At the back of the house, he knelt again and looked into the furnace room.

Faintly, he could hear the roar of a fire. Heat, at this time of the year? Well, there *was* a chill in the air. He spotted a gasoline can next to the furnace. Over to one side was a heap of cartons, jumbled, as if they had been suddenly dropped. On the side of the boxes in black letters was: "Penicillin."

He drew a long breath. What was Fostner doing with drugs like that in the house? He was in the accounting office. Why was he burning those cartons? Then, slowly, the explanation came through. Fostner had been stealing merchandise from his firm. He would be in a perfect position to cover up his theft with false invoices and jugged accounts.

Mr. Munn squatted there a long time, thinking. This still wasn't enough to warrant telling the police that Fostner was a murderer. He was only guessing. He listened to the roar of the fire, wondering if Fostner had realized he had made a mistake in tearing his coat in

Mr. Munn's presence and now had decided to burn that gray topcoat.

A cold, crawling sensation went across the back of his neck. He could feel someone standing behind him. He had been so intent on looking into the cellar that he had heard nothing. Slowly, his breath tight in his chest, he turned around. He looked into the muzzle of a gun. Behind it was Warren Fostner.

"Did you figure it out, Munn?" Fostner asked softly.

"Yes." Mr. Munn's voice was a bare whisper. "Pete found out what you were doing. He was blackmailing you."

"You're smarter than you look," Fostner said in an amused tone. "Yes, the fool was blackmailing me. He was getting more and more greedy. I wasn't going to let him destroy me, of course. This little business had been bringing me about eight thousand a year extra—which I certainly need. Drugs like these are worth quite a bit on the European black markets. But that snooping idiot had to spoil it."

"You didn't have to do it," Mr. Munn said huskily. "You have a good job. You have a good salary."

Fostner shrugged. "Not good enough. Unfortunately, I contracted an expensive fever of my own—horse fever. I thought sure that barber, Salvatore, was going to give me away in front of Doctor Browne. I did some of my business—a very small part of it—through the barber. But it would have been embarrassing if it had come out. People might start to wonder about me."

There was a long moment of silence. Then, "You were very foolish to come here, Munn. You know what I'm going to have to do, don't you?"

"Yes."

Mr. Munn realized his voice was a bare whisper. He stared up at Fostner, wondering why he wasn't afraid of the man. He felt only contempt.

"I'm not going to kill you here, of course," Fostner went on in a low voice. "The police are still in the neighborhood. We'll take a little ride into the country, shall we?"

Mr. Munn didn't answer. He didn't move.

"Get up, Munn."

Still, Mr. Munn didn't move. Still, he was not afraid. He was thinking if he went meekly with Fostner, he would be shot down like a cringing dog. Somehow, he didn't want to die that way.

"Get up," Fostner repeated. "I don't want to shoot you here—unless I have to."

Mr. Munn slowly got to his feet, his eyes fixed on Fostner's face. He could sense that Fostner was afraid, too, that Fostner was trembling inside, too. Somehow, that made him feel better, stronger.

"Turn around," Fostner said tautly. "Walk up to the garage. It's open."

Mr. Munn started to turn. He lurched sideward suddenly, rammed himself into Fostner. The gun went off like a sharp clap of thunder in his ears. Mr. Munn swung out blindly, as if fighting to free himself of the ringing sounds in his ears. He saw Fostner stagger back.

BLINDLY, fiercely, he rushed forward. Fostner regained his balance, lifted his gun again. Mr. Munn kicked out. The toe of his shoe cracked against Fostner's wrist. Fostner screamed with pain and the gun went twisting and turning into the darkness. Mr. Munn didn't give him a chance to regain his balance again. He surged in, both fists flailing. There was no science in his blows. There was only savage desperation, and a curious glowing exultation.

Fostner was babbling something now, but Mr. Munn paid no attention. He dared not stop. He felt the same as he would if he had a snake in front of him.

He couldn't stop until he knew the snake could harm him no more.

Vaguely, he heard someone shouting in his ear. He didn't pause or turn. He didn't dare.

Then, suddenly, Fostner was gone. Mr. Munn blinked, as if awakening from a nightmare. At his feet, Fostner was a crumpled heap, his face puffed and battered almost beyond recognition. The fire, burning so fiercely in his breast just an instant before, seemed to die abruptly, and he was himself once more.

"You're a tough man when roused, Mr. Munn," he heard someone's voice say.

He turned and found Detective Palanca at his side. His eyes widened with surprise.

"We followed you here," Palanca said. "We figured you knew something about this. I guess you didn't want to denounce one of your neighbors before you were sure of your facts."

Mr. Munn felt strangely numb inside. He could hear himself telling his story, in calm tones, from the very beginning. He was vaguely aware that a crowd was gathering out on the street.

Then, suddenly, his eyes cleared and he saw Edna coming up the path toward him. She was crying a little as he took her in his arms. He didn't say anything. He kissed her gently on the forehead.

Detective Palanca grunted. "I guess that washes it up, all right. You'll be quite a hero, Mr. Munn."

Mr. Munn smiled a little. It was nice to hear that, and he knew he could once more meet his neighbors' eyes. But he also knew it wasn't true. In his own heart, he knew that Mr. Munn would never be a hero.



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For hours, Laura sat by the rear window, looking out into the darkness

DEATH WATCH

The man had slain her father, and Laura knew that some day, before very long, he would return—looking for her!

THE TWO rooms Laura Barton occupied with her father were on the fourth floor. That meant three flights of steps to climb, but it also meant some relief from the smell and noise of the incessant traffic in the street. The street in front was a truck route through town.

In the rear, they had an unimpeded

view of a two-hundred-car parking lot. Some evenings, when there was something going on at the Auditorium, she'd sit in the rear and watch all the activity in the parking lot. Concerts were best. That's when the fine cars came to the lot.

She'd sit and pretend that one of them was hers. That swank convertible, for instance. And that handsome lad in

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

white dinner jacket and dark trousers, he was her fiancé and their wedding was to be the social event of the season.

Her father would be working at his table, with the bright light overhead, repairing some watch too delicate for the shops to handle. That was the only work he got, the stuff the jewelers jobbed out to him, because it was too much for most of them.

Her father would look up, and smile. "Dreaming again, my Princess?"

"A little," she'd admit.

He'd shake his head and sigh. "You don't need to dream, darling. A girl with your beauty—"

What could she say to that? That she was ashamed to have a boyfriend call for her here? That a boyfriend insensitive enough to miss the squalor of the place would need to be from the same background? And that she didn't want, that she wouldn't settle for.

It had been her home through high school. Now that she was working, their combined incomes could have managed something better. But now, this spring, there was a housing shortage and they were lucky to have a roof over their heads.

SHE COULDN'T tell her father these things. He was as sensitive as she was. He would take it as a condemnation of his fatherly neglect. This man of the agile hands and shriveled legs had been a father to be proud of. He still was.

Before the accident Louis Barton had been a construction engineer, and a good one. Ever since his legs had been crushed by a falling beam, he'd done the best he could. He'd been father and mother, both. A quiet, understanding man.

Before the accident he'd planned on college for her. But it finally had been business school, and then the job. She knew he felt badly about that. And sometimes, late at night, she'd wake to find him sitting quietly by the window, smoking and staring.

This night she sat by the window, with just a dim light in the room, watching the lot below. The cars were coming in a steady stream, and she admired the deft, casual way the attendants wheeled

them into orderly rows, like an artillery battalion parading its equipment.

The last car went in, a few of the big floodlights went out, and in the comparative dimness the attendants turned back toward the shack in a corner of the lot. That's where they played cards until the crowd broke again, around midnight.

One of them hung back a little, and when the others were well enough ahead, he looked up. He looked up and waved, just as he had a week ago.

This time, Laura waved back.

She waved, and felt a sudden shame, and wondered at the impulse that had prompted it. Loneliness, certainly, but it had been so cheap.

He waved again, then headed for the shack.

She looked over to see if her father was awake, but he was sleeping quietly. She looked down at the shack, where they were playing cards. She knew which one he was—the redhead, the stocky one with the bright blue eyes.

He'd said hello to her a few times when she went past, and she'd ignored him. He hadn't seemed fresh, just friendly, but she'd ignored him nevertheless. She had her firm beliefs about pickups. If he'd been introduced, of course—

It was only a little after eight and the night was warm. She could still go to a movie and get out before eleven. She was going to the wardrobe for her coat when the knock came at the door. She had the coat over her arm as she went to open it.

It was a thin man, rather poorly dressed. His eyes glowed in the dim hall like the eyes of a cat.

"The mister here?" he asked.

"My father's sleeping," Laura said. "He had a headache and he went to bed early."

Displeasure showed on the man's thin face, and a strange chill came to Laura.

"Bed already?" the stranger said. "Look, this watch I got, it's a high-priced watch. It ain't nothin' I'd let anybody work on."

Laura didn't look at the man's glowing eyes as she said, "If you want to leave it with me, I'll give you a receipt, and my father will get right to work on

it in the morning."

Hesitation, and then he smiled. It wasn't a smile that helped his face any. "Sure, that's okay. I guess I can trust you, huh? Was you goin' out?" He indicated the coat.

"No," Laura said. "I'll get your receipt."

She went over to her father's table to write it out. She turned on the bright light overhead before she did. When she turned again, the man was in the room. The door was almost completely closed. The man was staring at her with a sort of hunger in the bright eyes.

Laura could scarcely talk. But she managed, "You've the watch, please?"

He nodded, and reached into his jacket pocket. He brought it out, held it toward her. It took every atom of her will to reach her hand out to accept it. His hand brushed hers in transferring the watch, and she shivered. She held the receipt by one corner, and he took it.

"You ain't scared, are you?" he said, staring at her.

"No," she lied. "Why should I be?"

"You look scared," he said.

"I've been sick recently," Laura said. "The doctor's coming. He's ten minutes late now."

She looked squarely at him as she said this. Then, as though to substantiate her lie, there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs a flight below.

"That must be the doctor, now," Laura said quickly.

They were heavy footsteps, and the man seemed to be listening with some interest.

"I'll be back, then," he said quickly. "You'll be here, maybe huh?"

"If I'm not," Laura said evenly, "my father will be. Good evening."

HE WENT through the door furtively, and Laura closed it. She locked it, leaned against it and started to cry. A little later she went to the sink and washed her face with cold water. It wasn't only the man. It was this place, and her dad's affliction, and the day-after-day loneliness that could lead a girl to wave back from a window.

Laura turned off the bright light after a while. But first, she examined the

watch. It was a beautiful pocket piece of elegant simplicity, white gold, and one of the three best foreign makes. It didn't go at all with the shabby, thin, bright-eyed man.

After the light was out, she sat again by the window, looking down at the shack where the boys were playing cards. For some reason, it comforted her to watch them through the shack's wide windows. They were so healthy, so active, so carefree.

She kept one dim light on all night.

In the morning, her father asked, "Who brought this watch in?"

"I didn't ask his name," Laura said. "I didn't do a very good job on the receipt, Dad. He—I was nervous. He made me nervous."

"Nervous? Why?"

"He acted so strange! He was thin and shabby, and he had the queerest eyes!"

"A shabby man, with a watch like this?" He frowned. "Honey, you said his eyes were queer. It wasn't— Well, no, you wouldn't know him. I guess you never met Sliver."

"Sliver?" She looked at her father wonderingly. "Who's that? What kind of name is that?"

"It's a nickname, I suppose," he said. "He brought a watch to me some months ago. But he never picked it up. The police did. It was stolen. Queer eyes, you say?"

Laura nodded. "Like a cat."

Her father expelled his breath. "If it is Sliver, I'll tell him a thing or two. I don't want him around here."

"Be careful, Dad. You won't let your temper get the best of you?"

He smiled at her. "When did I ever get a temper?"

"When you said you'd tell him a thing or two," Laura said. "You sounded angry."

"I was," he said. "But now, I'm just hungry. That coffee's been perking long enough now, don't you think?"

They didn't talk much at breakfast. Her father seemed unusually thoughtful, and when she left for the office, he gave her a word of warning:

"Don't think about that man, Laura. And next time a customer comes in, wake me, will you?"

She nodded and kissed his forehead, and went to the door. Then, for some reason, she turned to look back at him and the strangest sense of foreboding came to her. She wanted to stay. It may have been only the memory of the strange man and this morning's manifestation of her father's temper, but she sensed it was deeper than that.

Then the mood passed, and she went out and down the three flights of steps to the street. The parking lot was deserted. Its trade depended on the Auditorium patronage and there was nothing going on at the Auditorium during the day. Just the same, she glanced briefly at the shack as she went by.

Two blocks down, she caught a green bus.

For the next eight hours, with the exception of her lunch period, Laura sat in front of her typewriter. She worked for a law firm and thought there could be no more monotonous stenographic work.

When she'd finished the day, she had a small, dull ache at the back of her neck, and she had almost forgotten the night before.

But riding the crowded bus home, she began to think of the two rooms and the clatter of the trucks. She began to think of the despondency that had lived with her father these past weeks of gray winter, and the memory of last night came back.

As she turned the corner, she could see the red-headed attendant standing at the entrance to the parking lot. She didn't look up as she went past, and he made no comment.

The smell of boiling parsnips and the blare of a shrieking radio greeted her as she turned in from sidewalk. The three flights up to her floor had never been more tiring. Before she opened the door, however, she managed a smile of greeting. Every day, she did that.

Today the smile froze on her face, and she stared rigidly at the figure—the waxen, sitting figure of her father in his familiar chair. His eyes were open, but seeing nothing. There was the handle of a knife protruding from his throat.

For seconds she stood, staring. She opened her mouth but no sound came. Then she turned and ran down the steps.

She was sobbing hysterically by the time she got to the sidewalk.

She turned to the left instinctively, toward the red-headed attendant still standing in front of the parking lot.

"My father!" she sobbed, and pointed wildly. "He's—dead! He's been—"

And then she fainted.

SERGEANT PLOTKIN was a heavy man, with a round face and dark eyes. His voice was soft. "Sliver, you said? That's the name your father identified him by?"

Laura nodded, and her eyes went to the now-empty chair. "Of course, I don't know if he was the—" She broke off. "He seemed so—so deadly last night, that I thought of him first."

The sergeant nodded sympathetically. "He'd make a good choice. You say he brought a watch to be repaired?"

"A very expensive watch of white gold."

"It's still here?"

Laura glanced over at her father's work table. Then she got up to go over and look for the watch. Her legs were still weak and her hand trembled as she pulled out the large drawer in the center of the table.

The watch wasn't there.

"We'll track down this Sliver, one way or another," Plotkin said, rising. "In the meantime, you better be kind of careful, Miss. Keep your door locked."

It was something she'd have done without his suggestion.

The day after the funeral, he came back. He said, "This Sliver must have disappeared off the face of the earth. Not a trace of him, anywhere. But be careful, just the same."

The next day, Laura went to work. The Home Show was going on at the Auditorium, so the parking lot was open during the day. "Red" Dugan was just ticketing up a car as she went by. She stopped, waiting for him to finish.

When the occupants of the car had left, she said, "I want to thank you for—for taking over, that day. I appreciate it."

His smile was bashful. "The cops haven't uncovered anything, according to the papers, I see."

"Yes, that's right," she nodded.

"You'll pardon me, Miss Barton, but you'll be careful, won't you?" He was blushing, now.

"I will," she said. "I'm frightened."

That was the start of it. Friday night, she went to a movie with him. He told her about himself, about going to engineering school on the G.I. Bill, of his part-time work here to help pad out his allowance.

She told him about her father and about the monotony of her work, and of her hatred of her environment. In telling him, she saw it more clearly than ever, and resolved this would be her last year in the neighborhood.

Housekeeping rooms were impossible to get, but she could find a nice room in some private home and eat out. Or she could board.

The next Saturday night, they went to an informal dance at the engineering school. It was a magic night; it was almost up to her dreams. And Red? Well, Red was scrubbed and shiny and full of life, and he danced with the sure grace of a lad who'd spent a lot of time in dancehalls.

He was an engaging boy, fun to be with, safe to be with, Laura thought. If he wasn't up to the suave prince of the dream, he was real and he loved her.

He told her that, Saturday night. He stood at her door, in the dimness of the hall, awkwardly framing the words that told her he'd loved her from the first time he'd seen her, walking past the lot. There wasn't any doubt in his mind, but he didn't want to rush her and he didn't want her to answer him tonight. He just wanted her to know.

Then he turned and went quickly down the stairs. As she watched him go, she felt the pound of her heart and realized his attraction was strong.

She unlocked the door and went in. The familiar scene was almost a shock, after the glamour of the dance, and as she stood surveying it she realized this would be her future with Red. At least until he was through school, which would be some time, yet. She remembered her dad telling her about his early struggles as a young engineer. This sort of place could be her home for a long time.

It was a bad night.

IN THE morning, Laura rose late and went out for breakfast. She walked past the parking lot, past the mean buildings that flanked it, up the drab, smelly streets of her neighborhood. She walked almost all the way downtown before she found a restaurant she'd care to eat in.

At noon, Red called for her. They were going to a lecture at the museum. He was unusually quiet. She knew he was waiting for some answer to his declaration of last night. She said nothing.

After the lecture, they had a sandwich and coffee and walked over to the park. There, she told him, "I'm sorry you feel the way you do about me. I—" She couldn't go on.

"You don't feel that way?"

"I might, but— Oh, it would be so long before—"

"Before we could be married, you mean?"

She shook her head. "Before we could get, before we could live, in some place decent!" She didn't look at him.

Red didn't say anything, and after a few moments she looked over to see the anguish on his face. She put a hand on his.

"Red, I didn't mean anything nasty. I'm no snob, but—"

"What difference does it make?" he asked harshly. "Your answer's the same. I thought it was something we could work out together. I know you've got your dreams. I thought we could—" His face was red, his eyes angry. "Oh, what difference does it make? Let's go!"

He was standing, now, and she looked up into the angry blue eyes, felt the pull of them, and almost gave in. But she rose, and they walked from the park without another word. Words, she knew, were useless unless they were the ones he wanted to hear.

He didn't walk up the three flights with her, today. He stood in front of the big, dirty building and said, "If you should change your mind, you know where I work." Then he walked off.

She didn't start to cry until she was alone in the two rooms.

Monday, after work, Sergeant Plotkin was waiting in front in a police car.

"We've had a rumor that Sliver

Sampson is still in town," he told her. "I don't know how true it is, but I just dropped by to tell you to be careful."

"Maybe," Laura said, "he had nothing to do with it."

Plotkin was frowning. "From what the neighbors have told me, your father was arguing with somebody before it happened. That was in the morning, and he said something about not bringing a watch that was probably stolen, and scaring his daughter. The watch Sliver brought is the only one that's missing. We've had trouble with him before. Twice he accosted women, and once he pulled a knife on a sailor. If he isn't guilty, it's a lot of coincidence to be explained."

"But why would he bother me?" Laura asked.

"Because you can identify him as the man who brought the watch," Plotkin said. "And because he's—well, he's what he is."

It was another reason to move, but she didn't. That evening, she sat by the window waiting for the floodlights to go on.

But the lot wasn't open—the Home Show was over.

She saw a light, after a while, in the shack, but couldn't make out who was in there.

She kept a light on all night in her rooms. Twice she heard feet on the stairs, coming up, but both times they turned off at the floors below. She was up with the sun, and she made an extra cup of coffee this morning.

She was finishing the second cup when she saw the dirty, white envelope on the floor near the door. She went over to pick it up, wondering if it was something that had blown from a table.

It wasn't. It was a badly written note, and read:

Your pa shouldn't have got so mad. He shouldn't have hollered at me. Don't tell the cops what I look like and you'll be all right.

It wasn't signed. The envelope was white, the paper a pale blue. Laura looked at the large crack under the front door and realized that man had been standing in the hall, some time last night, separated from her only by this frail-looking door.

L AURA called Sergeant Plotkin from the office and he was there just before she went out to lunch. They went to a restaurant together. He handled the note carefully, when she gave it to him, and put it in an inside pocket of his jacket.

"I'll notify the precinct captain and maybe he can spare a man to keep an eye on your place," he said. "But we're short on men, right now." He sighed wearily. "We'll do all we can, Miss Barton."

Laura left him with the feeling that she was just one more problem in an already overworked department. It was logical to assume they couldn't keep a guard on her place indefinitely, and one man couldn't watch both entrances.

The lot was still closed when she went past that evening. She stood there a moment, and then went across the street to the Auditorium. She learned the next big event would be the Sports Show. And that wouldn't open for ten days.

When she opened the door to her apartment, her eyes went automatically to the spot on the floor where she'd found the note. There was none this evening. Before she closed the door she looked carefully around the room. Then she locked it.

It was like living in a tomb, like living under a sword. She kept seeing those catlike eyes and that thin face. She kept seeing the handle of the knife, protruding from her father's throat.

After supper, she went to the front window and saw the beat patrolman, walking past. He paused for a while in front of the building, looking up and down the street.

She went to the back and saw the darkened parking lot, and her thoughts went to Red. She tried to picture him down there, looking up, waving. Waving at his princess.

Laura tried to read, but the words didn't hold her. She turned on the radio, but its noise only disturbed her. She felt it would cover the sound of other noises she wanted to her, other noises which would be a warning.

A sense of a presence came to her, for no reason at all, and she became rigid. Then her better sense took command and she searched every possible

hiding place in the two rooms, including the space under the beds.

For hours after that she sat by the rear window, looking out into the darkness. Again she saw the light in the shack, but all the shades were down and she couldn't make out the occupant.

What if that were Sliver, down there? What better place to hide than right under the eyes of the law? That would appeal to a man of Sliver's mentality. He must be clever, to stay in town and avoid the law.

Laura kept a light on all night, and slept in short, tortured stretches, punctuated by dreams that brought her sharply awake.

Wednesday was no better. Her eyes couldn't follow the typed lines of the abstract she was copying, and her touch was ragged and uncertain on the machine.

That night, she dreamed that Sliver stood at the doorway saying, "I'll be back, then. You'll be here, maybe, huh?"

Thursday, she didn't go to work. She thought she might be able to sleep during the day. Her whole body cried with the need of it. She napped for a while after breakfast, but that was all the sleep she got.

This was nonsense, she told herself. She made a big lunch and forced herself to eat every mouthful. Then she went out, to a movie. She picked the funniest movie in town.

It helped very little. But when she left the dimness of the theater for the brightness of the street again, it was Red she was thinking of, not that man. A part of the sleeplessness was due to Red.

If she knew where he lived, she'd go to him now. She'd tell him life was no good without him. They'd work it out, somehow. It would mean more years of squalor and struggle and insecurity, but they'd be years with him.

She went out to supper at a restaurant beyond her budget. When she boarded a bus to go home, it was already dusk. Every block she traveled seemed to deepen her depression. She looked around at the other passengers, wondering what they were going home to, wondering how many like her in the city resented their backgrounds.

THE PARKING lot looked lonely in the dusk, the huge, grimy front of her building foreboding. Laura climbed the stairs slowly, her tenseness coming back, her imagination running away again.

She hesitated at the door for seconds before opening it. She locked the door after her and turned on the bright light over her father's work table.

Her legs were tired, her body heavy with fatigue, but her mind was alert and her hearing never more acute. She sat in the big chair near the rear window and saw again a light in the parking-lot shack. Then, abruptly, it went out.

She waited for the door to open, but it didn't. She watched it for almost a half hour and the door didn't open. Nor did the light reappear.

Suddenly she felt nervous. She turned out the big light over the table and snapped on the dimmer glow from a floor lamp. She put the radio on, softly, and went back to sit in the big chair.

Lassitude came with the dim music from the radio. She'd been at a pitch physically impossible to maintain. Her eyes drooped and she slept.

What awakened her, she didn't know immediately. But she was suddenly awake. It seemed to her the radio was louder, and then she realized the floor lamp was out! The room's only light came through the transom from the hall.

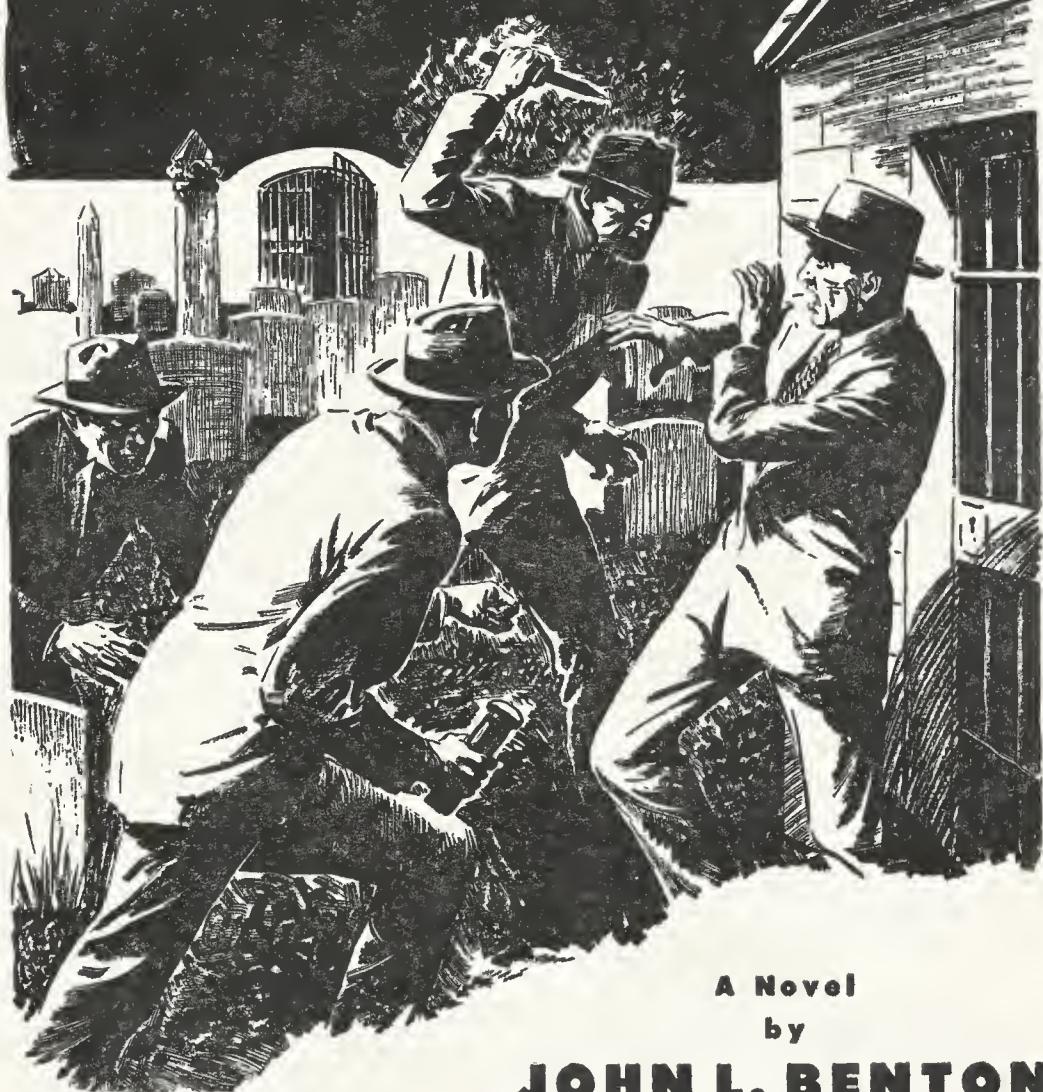
It could have been a defective bulb. It could have been a blown fuse. These things were normal. There was no reason to assume—

For the second time, Laura had that feeling of a *presence*, that intangible sense of someone watching, waiting, seeing her from some dark corner. She wanted to cry out, but there was no reason for it. She had the feeling that would be proof of a cracking mind, if she became hysterical over—over nothing. Bulbs did burn out. Radios did get louder for no apparent reason. She heard the announcer's voice giving the time as ten-thirty. Then the music started again. She'd been sleeping for over three hours.

If a neighbor would drop in, if only Red should decide to come up— But

(Continued on page 125)

FOCUS on MURDER



A Novel

by

JOHN L. BENTON

A CLASSIC OF DETECTIVE FICTION



A camera is Jerry Wade's best weapon when he fights to snap a ring of racketeers wide open and close the shutter on a crime case which has drawn Christine Stuart into grave danger!

CHAPTER I

PICTURE OF A CORPSE

THREE were two people in the car which bore "press" marker plates. One was red-headed, bantam-sized Jerry Wade, ace press photographer. Besides him sat Christine Stuart, pert, pretty but glum. Both of them were glum, as sad looking as though they were on their way to a funeral—which was exactly where they were going. Not that they loved the corpse—they had never known the dead man in life—but such minor details didn't bother a city editor much.

"I've taken shots of everything from a five-minute-old baby to a hundred-and-ten-year-old woman," Wade grumbled. "But this is the first time I've ever taken a picture of a corpse that wasn't murdered or died a freak death."

Christine slumped a little lower in the seat. "Listen, Jerry, all you have to do is step up to the casket, snap your little picture and it's over. But me—I've got to get details. Now what can you write about a man who died a death as unromantic as he did? Pneumonia. Huh! And he was practically broke. Just because he happened to be a big shot once, the City Desk wants to make a story out of it. Why didn't he send a cub?"

Jerry angled his coupé between the hearse and the flower cars which were parked in front of the funeral home. They'd be out long before the actual

ceremonies began. He picked up his camera, handling it like a mother would handle her child. He made sure the synchronized flash bulb was in place. Something told him the relatives of this dead man wouldn't care much about having a picture of their bereaved flashed across the front pages of a newspaper, and one shot was all he would get. But city editors were funny guys. Sometimes they could smell news a mile away.

Hayes Funeral Home was an elaborate affair. A man in mourning clothes bowed to Christine and shook her hand limply. Jerry didn't shake hands. He was too busy concealing his camera behind his back. Someone gave him a violent shove, and Jerry turned half angrily. A man with a black beard was hurrying into the place as though he was afraid of being seen. Jerry shrugged and forgot the incident.

Christine went to work swiftly once they were inside. She spoke to the family, consisting of a weak-chinned son and a horde of nephews and nieces. Jerry Wade remained in the background until Christine signaled that she had her story. Then Jerry stepped closer to the casket, raised his camera and snapped one picture. He didn't wait to apologize. He simply turned and walked rapidly out the door which Christine held open for him.

SOMEONE violated the silence of the house of death by yelling an imprecation. Jerry took Christine's arm and piloted her very fast toward the car. They got in, and Jerry shot away from the curb. Christine looked behind and made a wry face.

"Some guy with a horse-hair mattress on his chin is shaking his fist, darling. I don't think you'd want to meet him again. I—what's the matter with the guy? A couple of other people came out of the funeral home, and old mattress face took a powder. He's dusting down the street as neat as can be."

"Crackpot," Jerry said. "I know him. He tried to stave in a couple of my ribs. Oh, well, we got what we were after, although there's a sour taste in my mouth. Lady, I'm sick of these trivial assignments. Why can't a nice juicy murder or a big fire bust loose. I don't wish anybody hard luck, of course. But I feel like apologizing to my camera every night."

"Before you tuck it in bed," Christine added icily. "When we're busy, you haven't time to take me out. When we're not busy, you moon around hoping for breaks and you're in no mental state to take me out. I lose all the way around. Don't you think I like to dance or eat good food, slowly?"

"Sure." Jerry grinned. "I do, too, but we're reporters. Now suppose I take you to a swell shindig. Okay—what happens? We're starting a bottle of champagne, let's say. The squab on your plate is steaming hot. Swell. Then it's time to call the Desk, and I get the bad news. Some dopey debutante is having a party for a lot of other dopey debutantes.

"One of 'em is going to eat a doughnut while standing on her head. So what? So the Desk says there's a swell yarn. Nobody but Jerry Wade and Chris Stuart can handle it. So our champagne gets flat and our squab gets cold. Let's take it from another angle—"



"Now take your uniform and put it on Pop!" (CHAP. VII!)

"You take it," Chris said morosely. "All I'm getting is hungry."

Jerry waved to a traffic cop and got a broad grin. There were few policemen who didn't know him, or Christine either for that matter. Jerry pulled to the curb of the newspaper office. Christine climbed out wearily.

"Now you write a nice exciting yarn of the funeral, baby," Jerry chuckled. "I'll do a super de luxe job of developing this pic. See you tonight, huh? There's a movie up the street about newspaper guys. Let's go see how we don't live."

Jerry was whistling gayly as he drove to his apartment. That it was located directly across the street from Police Headquarters wasn't by chance. When a big story broke, Jerry was practically on it before the cops got rolling.

He had come to the city not so many months before, a green, shy, country kid. His first assignment had made him. What one editor considered a rare joke on this greenhorn with red hair, boomeranged to become one of the biggest stories of the year.

Christine had taken him in hand. Wise to city ways she quickly broke him of his shyness and something far greater than friendship sprang up between them. Jerry now worked for a news syndicate—Christine for one of the big dailies. But editors who wanted superlative results let them work together. They had become a smooth, hard-hitting team.

Jerry was no bruiser. In fact, he was considerably undersized, but he had a temper that matched his red hair and fists that were like dynamite. Mere size meant nothing to him.

He let himself into his apartment, threw his hat, coat and vest on a davenport, rolled up his sleeves and donned a stained laboratory apron. Mixing his developer, he checked the temperature of his fixing bath and then unloaded the camera.

He slid the film into the solution, humming as he worked. He always hummed when he was doing anything connected

with photography. It formed one of the two great interests in his life. The other was Christine.

The negative developed rapidly, and he held the dripping piece of celluloid up to the ruby lamp. It was a good shot all right—everything was sharp and clear, even the faces of people who stood behind the casket and accidentally got into the picture.

He dried the negative quickly and made several prints. Half an hour later he studied them under a strong light. In the foreground was the casket and its corpse. Flowers banked the background along with a few people who had been in the way.

Then he picked up a magnifying glass. A tall, thick-leaved fern occupied a position behind, and near the head of the casket. A man's face was peering through the foliage. It was the pan of the bearded man who had shaken his fist at Jerry's departing car.

"What the heck?" Jerry muttered. Skilled in the ability to notice details, especially in pictures, Jerry studied the face of the corpse and then the features of the bearded man.

"Wide forehead—the same," he muttered. "Nose thin and sharp—pretty much alike. Eyebrows shaggy. If I could only see that Airedale's mouth and chin. I don't have to. It's the same. The bearded guy is the twin of the man in the casket. Twin, my eye! A brother wouldn't try to hide himself or run away when he was noticed. One of those guys is a substitute, a fake, and I'm betting it's the poor mug in the casket!"

JERRY phoned the office, and a complete history of Hugh Patterson was read off to him. Age fifty-three, capitalist until the Japanese army invaded the East Indies. Then a man with ideals, trying to recoup his lost fortune by more spending. More and more until he was virtually a bankrupt. A brilliant career, stymied through no fault of his own. A plunger who lost and took it with a smile and wouldn't give up—until lately.

He'd gone to pot then. Finally pneumonia. Picked up more dead than alive and died ten hours later, in the charity ward of a great hospital, unknown and unrecognized. Later, at the morgue, his son had appeared and made positive identification.

Lighting a cigarette, Jerry puffed slowly on it and leaned back in his chair, propping both feet on a table.

"Something wrong," he told himself. "Suppose the guy in the casket *was* a double and Hugh Patterson is still alive! What's behind it? Insurance? Maybe this is all planned so he can collect on his own death. But how could a man as broke as Patterson was, pay premiums on a policy big enough to warrant murder?"

Jerry jumped up, grabbed his coat and vest, jammed his hat on and rushed for the door. He skidded to a halt, dashed back into the dark room and re-loaded his camera. Being without that was like walking down Times Square in his underwear to Jerry Wade. He raced down the steps, jumped into his coupé and then paused to think.

"Ready to travel, but where?" he asked himself. Then he snapped his fingers. "The undertaker! That's the answer. The funeral must be over by now. I'll go back to the funeral home and have a little talk with the undertaker. If he gags at my questions, then I'll know I'm right. He couldn't inter the body without a death certificate so he certainly can't bluff me."

Jerry walked up on the porch of the funeral home and punched the bell. An old, stooped man answered and escorted Jerry into a nicely furnished office. Three minutes later Leon Hayes, the mortician, walked in and sat down behind his desk. He studied Jerry a moment and then he started up angrily.

"You're that reporter who took pictures," he snapped. "I'm not in the habit of allowing such sacrilege. Don't you realize what you did?"

"Yeah, yeah," Jerry broke in. "I did wrong. But listen, something's hap-

pened. Was the man you buried as Hugh Patterson, really Hugh Patterson? Did you know him in life so that you can be sure enough to swear there was no switch of bodies?"

Hayes sat down abruptly and stared. "Why—why I can't swear to it, no. I was called by the deceased man's son, told the body was at the morgue and I sent for it. The death certificate was in order. My embalmers took over, I conducted the funeral.

"No one showed the slightest indication that the corpse was not that of Hugh Patterson. But wait—I did hear a few people say he didn't look natural. Now that's a reflection on my profession. We do the best we can, which happened to be very good in Patterson's case."

Jerry's eyes were shining. He was certain that by both his actions and his ready admission of doubt, the undertaker was on the level.

"I'm going to trust you. There was a heavily-bearded man at the service today. He happened to push his face into the picture I took."

Jerry placed the picture on the desk.

"Compare the face in the casket with that of the bearded man whose face is sticking out between those palm fronds. Compare that face—what you can see of it above the beard—with the man in the casket. Note the forehead, the eyes, the nose. Brother, I'm betting eight to three that Hugh Patterson was the bearded man and he came to see himself buried."

Hayes reached for the phone. "We'll take this up with Patterson's son. If he gives us no good explanation, we'll call in the police."

Jerry grabbed the undertaker's wrist before he could dial. "And spoil the whole set-up before we're sure? Look, after you're a newspaperman for a while, you learn it's healthy to check before you jump. We've got to be positive. What about the insurance angle?"

The undertaker nodded.

"That's exactly what I'm thinking

of," Hayes admitted slowly. "There was a policy for a hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars, paid up and never lapsed. I understand the company is making a rapid settlement. In fact, I've been promised my fee tomorrow. Look here, don't you think that this matter is a little beyond us?"

Jerry shook his head.

"It's in our laps. The proof we need is buried—under Hugh Patterson's tombstone."

"He was entombed in a vault which he purchased during his wealthier days," Hayes corrected. "What are you suggesting?"

"Just this." Jerry leaned across the desk. "For me this is a big story. For you—well, there's not so much. Publicity wouldn't do you a bit of good, but play along with me and I'll see that no sheet in the country even mentions your name. After it's dark, we'll pay the tomb a little visit, open the casket and have a good look. We'll take finger-prints and check them somehow. There are ways. If I'm right, we'll have all the evidence we need. How about it? Would you risk it?"

Hayes frowned. "It's all highly illegal. Frankly, I want nothing to do with it, but it appears I am involved—if your suspicions are correct. I must protect myself, so I agree. Have dinner with me. It will be dark in about two hours."

Jerry grinned and then he thought of something. Christine! He had promised her a night out. Jerry ran a finger around his collar. The moment he made excuses, Chris would demand an explanation. No matter what reason he cooked up, she'd be suspicious and this case might turn into a particularly smelly one, rampant with danger. Jerry knew the histories of other insurance swindles. And Christine was particularly susceptible to dangerous situations. It was better simply to forget the date. He'd explain later and take his medicine.

That was what he'd do.

CHAPTER II

DOUBLED IN DEATH



T nine-thirty Jerry deemed it dark enough to invade the cemetery. Hayes sat beside him as he switched off his headlights and pulled to the curb around the corner from the graveyard. They got out and walked. Halfway down the drive, a high gate barred their way. They climbed it quietly.

Armed with flashlights, they walked briskly up to the gloomy structure of cement. Hayes produced a key.

"I locked the door this afternoon and meant to turn the key over to young Patterson. I forgot, which is one of the few times that a lapse of memory has benefited me. Say, you're up to this, of course? Some people are squeamish about such things."

"Listen," Jerry said softly, "when there's a picture in it, I'd tackle the gates of Hell itself. Let's go!"

Hayes peered around in the inky darkness, shielded the lens of his flash and inserted the key. The gate swung open with a screech that made Jerry wince. He followed Hayes inside.

"They haven't sealed the crypt yet," Hayes whispered. "Lucky for us."

He signaled Jerry to turn on his flash, seized two rings imbedded in the cement and lifted away a section of the tomb wall to expose the copper outer box. Jerry propped the flashlight with a rock, helped Hayes pull the heavy box out of its niche and lowered it to the floor. Hayes took out a screw-driver and went to work on the lid. Finally they both gazed down at the coffin itself.

"This makes or breaks a big story," Jerry whispered hoarsely. "Okay, Hayes—lift it."

The mortician raised the lid of the casket. The corpse lay exposed before them. Jerry drew a sharp breath. Hayes looked over his shoulder.

"That's the body that was brought to me," he said. "If it isn't Hugh Patterson's body, we can check and find out."

Jerry thrust his flashlight close to the pallid face. "Wait a minute. We won't even have to check. Look! Somebody shaved this corpse not long ago, somebody who didn't know much about wielding a razor on someone else. The skin is full of nicks. See that spot they missed near the Adam's apple? Mr. Hayes, this is Hugh Patterson's body all right, but it's not the body that was in your undertaking establishment this afternoon, I'll bet!"

Hayes grunted. "I'll soon tell you."

He looked up two minutes later and slowly closed the lid. "You're right. This corpse wasn't embalmed by my employees. The man who did it was a mighty poor hand at the job. Let's get out of here."

Jerry nodded. They hurriedly hoisted the copper box back into its niche, shoved the cement slab into place and stepped back into fresher air. Jerry shuddered. He had a feeling of danger hovering nearby. He tried to shrug it off as being a natural aftermath of the rather ghastly work he'd just helped to complete.

He watched Hayes prepare to shut the cement door and then close the gate on it. Jerry turned around suddenly. There is no place quite as silent as a cemetery after dark. Jerry's ears had detected the hoarse breathing of someone not far away in the darkness.

Something huge and powerful came vaulting over a low tombstone. A knife glittered.

"Look out!" Jerry yelled.

Hayes spun around, gave a hoarse scream and raised both hands to ward off the attack. Jerry started a dive toward him, but another dark form came slithering across the grass to seize one of his ankles. Jerry Wade went down with a thud. He heard the undertaker scream again, a cry that turned into a gurgle.

He gave his pinioned foot a quick

yank and then drove it forward again with all his strength. It clipped the man who held it full in the chest, eliciting a whoof of pain. Jerry was free. He arose, turned, and with scarcely no break in his motions, launched himself straight at the attacker. He wound one arm around the man's neck, pulled his head back and slammed a short blow to the face.

His fist felt bloody after it landed, but the man he held was much bigger than he and far more powerful. The fellow reached up, grabbed Jerry's shoulders and tried to toss him. Jerry let himself be raised a foot off the ground. Then he wound both legs around the man's middle and pounded home a couple of more blows. He didn't know exactly how Hayes fared, but he had an unpleasant idea. That gurgling sound more or less settled it.

The man he gripped was getting weak. Jerry kept beating his fists against his face now slippery with blood. Five seconds more and he'd have him, then something banged against Jerry's neck. Nerves became paralyzed, muscles refused to work. He felt his grip loosen, felt the man to whom he clung, shake him free. A heavy shoe kicked out, hit him on the cheek and sent him rolling over a couple of times. He saw two men coming toward him, one holding a knife aloft.

Jerry found himself sprawled across a grave. There was a cement urn almost under his hands. He grabbed it, threw the heavy object with all the strength he could muster. It hit the man with the knife full on the chest, knocked him down and kept him down for a minute or two. The second thug howled a curse, crouched and came on with the fury of a wild animal.

JERRY'S feet rose, poised and kicked. One heel clipped the thug on the neck, turned him into a groaning, pain-racked man. Jerry tried to get up. His legs were still wobbly. Both thugs were on their feet now. One drew a gun.

"Okay, squirt," he grated. "You asked for it!"

The gun blazed, and Jerry's world turned into a misty red kaleidoscope of horror. Gravestones began to spin madly. He knew that he was clawing at the earth, ripping up sod. Then dimly he heard a police whistle, heard the two thugs mutter imprecations as they turned to flee. Jerry closed his eyes and wondered if this was the way it felt to die. He even grinned a little at the thoughts of being killed in a cemetery. Such a handy place. Then everything turned black. . . .

When he opened his eyes again, it was just as black, but he became aware that he was staring straight up into the night sky. He groaned and cautiously tested his limbs. They moved. He turned his head, saw a tombstone beside him and things came back in a bitter rush. He used the tombstone to help drag himself back on his feet.

His face felt as though it were encased in plaster. He raised a hand to his cheek and found the plaster to be dried blood. A little more exploration revealed a furrow dug across his temple. The bullet had grazed him. He leaned limply against the stone. Half an inch either way and he'd have been fit company for those under the sod.

Someone shouted, and a flashlight's beam swept across a portion of the cemetery.

"Can't find a thing," a man's voice called. "Guess it was a backfire. Anyway, I don't like this place at night. We'll report it to the sergeant."

Jerry opened his mouth to yell. Those were policemen and police meant safety. Then he thought of Hayes. He fumbled around, drew his flashlight from his pocket and staggered over toward the tomb. There was no sign of the mortician. Jerry searched a wider area on the theory that he might have crawled away after being wounded. Finally he gave up. Hayes had vanished.

"If I go to the cops," he told himself, "they'll probably hold me as a material

witness, especially after I didn't tip them off about what I think is going on. Either that or they'll think I'm crazy."

Jerry made his way to the gates, found them still locked and scaled the fence. He found his car parked around the corner and looked at himself in the mirror. He shivered as he reached for his handkerchief. He wiped away most of the blood, examined the wound critically and decided a gauze pad and some adhesive plaster would fix it up. But iodine wouldn't stop the pounding headache, or the sickening feeling at the pit of his stomach.

Jerry drove back to his apartment, parked in front of it and eyed Police Headquarters doubtfully. His duty was to report the exchange of bodies and the disappearance of Undertaker Hayes, but Jerry had another duty—to his profession. If he talked now, every news-hawk and photographer in the East would concentrate on the case.

He shook his head gently and hurried to his apartment.

When he threw the door open, he automatically reached for something to throw, for the living room was illuminated. Then he saw Christine, curled up in one of the big chairs. Jerry quickly pulled the brim of his hat down to cover the wound mark.

"So!" Christine said without moving. "You finally came home. I waited an hour and a half before I hurried over here. I thought something must have happened to you and now I find you just forgot we had a date, that's all."

Jerry smiled but not broadly. "Sure, Chris, that's all. I—I had to deliver that shot we took and Joe Murphy at the syndicate offices started showing me a lot of new stuff that came in."

Christine arose slowly, and by her features Jerry realized he'd said something wrong. She stepped up to him and looked deeply into his eyes.

"Jerry, you don't often lie to me. You never have unless it's to keep me from trying to help you out of a dangerous

spot. You didn't see Murphy. He was the first man I called when you didn't show up. What's more, you didn't take those pics anywhere because the negative is in your dark room. You discovered something important. Don't deny it. You didn't even attempt to clean up the dark room, which is something you never fail to do unless you're in a big hurry. What is it, Jerry? I think I've a right to know."

Jerry flopped into a chair and lit a cigarette. "I tell you it's nothing, Chris. Maybe I had a hunch, but it petered out on me and it's not worth talking about. Suppose we postpone the diner date until tomorrow, huh? You don't mind, do you? I'm tired and need a load of sleep."

CHRIS was eying him critically, especially the hat pulled so far down over his forehead. Wade usually wore the hat well back on his head. She suddenly darted forth a hand and lifted it from his head. The bullet wound showed starkly clear, and Chris turned pale.

"Jerry, that wasn't made by a mosquito. Someone shot you. Jerry, you've got to tell me what this is all about."

Wade took both her hands in his own and looked up at her. "Look, darling, for once make believe you didn't notice anything. I did run into a little trouble, but nothing I can't clean up myself. The mugs behind it don't play nice, but they're rotten shots. The guy who put this mark on me did it from about fifteen paces and he missed. So just trot along and forget you saw me. I'm not ringing you in on this deal. There may be five aces in the deck."

Christine said nothing. She went to the medicine cabinet, brought out a first-aid kit and dressed the wound. Then she washed dried blood from behind Jerry's ear, patted his hand and walked to the door.

"Good night, Jerry. For once I will take your advice and keep out. I'll go straight home—and to bed. Maybe in the morning you'll feel like telling me what happened."

Jerry nodded, blinking as the door closed. He'd never seen Chris give in so easily. But he felt a load removed from his mind. Those two leering thugs who had tried to gun him out at the cemetery weren't the type to worry much whether or not their chosen victim happened to be a girl.

CHAPTER III

SHOTS FROM DARKNESS



JERRY waited ten minutes before he left the apartment. He didn't turn out the lights for fear Chris might not have left the neighborhood, and as long as she saw the apartment illuminated she would suspect nothing and have no worries. At length Jerry departed through the rear exit of the house, slipped to the corner and peered down the street. Certain he was unobserved, he sprinted for his coupé, climbed in and drove away fast.

There were two leads to the murder trail. One lay with Hugh Patterson's son and heir, the other at Hayes' Funeral Home. Somewhere in his organization Hayes had an informer. This was obvious from the fact that Jerry had mentioned a visit to the Patterson tomb only to Hayes and only in the undertaker's private office. There had certainly been a substitution of bodies after the burial, and the need for an embalmer was of paramount importance if the person or persons involved in the mess expected to prevent this substitution from becoming known.

It followed that such an embalmer was either Hayes himself or someone probably in his employ. If it had not been Hayes, the probabilities were that this someone had eavesdropped on Jerry and the undertaker. Jerry's entrance into the case had been an unlooked for threat, and the "someone" had promptly taken steps to circumvent its consequences.

Patterson's house was a big place, but it was gone to seed. It needed painting, the grounds were shabby, and a blind hung askew on one hinge at a front window. The weak-chinned son, Ronald Patterson opened the door to Jerry's knock.

"What do you want?" he demanded aggressively, squinting at his caller from behind his big, shell-rimmed glasses. "I know you! You're the reporter who took that picture at my father's funeral. Get out!"

Jerry thrust his foot through the closing door, gave young Patterson a shove and eased himself inside. "Act your age, pretty boy. I'm here on important business. You'll talk to me, or your next visitor will be a cop."

A hand dropped on Jerry's shoulder, and he spun like a top, fists poised for defense. He was confronting a man of about fifty, gray-haired and wearing pince-nez glasses.

"Perhaps you'd better tell me what this is all about," the elderly man suggested. "I'm Frank Townsend, Mr. Patterson's attorney. Just step into the library, please."

Jerry followed the attorney into a huge room which once must have been an ornate place. Now the bookshelves were mostly bare, mutely attesting Patterson's need for raising cash. A small desk was practically lost in one corner. Townsend sat down behind it, touched the tips of his fingers together and waited.

"I'm coming clean with the whole affair," Jerry said. "Hugh Patterson was supposed to be buried this afternoon. The man in the casket was not Hugh Patterson—it was someone who looked like him or was made up to look like him."

Townsend arose, his ruddy face paling. "Go on," he urged. "What else have you to say?"

"Tonight the real Hugh Patterson is dead, although he wasn't this afternoon, and I can prove it. The body of the substitute corpse was removed from the

tomb and that of the real Hugh Patterson put in its place. I can prove that, too. The men who did it waylaid me and Leon Hayes, the undertaker. Hayes has vanished, and I barely escaped with my life. So I'm demanding an explanation of the whole smelly affair from young Patterson—now."

Ron Patterson was slowly backing away as Jerry spoke. Suddenly he gave vent to a sharp cry, swiveled around and raced out of the room. Jerry was after him in a flash, but young Patterson had fear to lend wings to his flight. He went up the staircase two steps at a time, raced into one of the bedrooms and slammed the door. Jerry heard the key turn just as he reached for the knob.

"Listen, you fool," Jerry said, "if you're mixed up in this, say so. Make a clean breast of the affair and you'll come out of it okay. Locking yourself into a room won't stop me from reaching you. Open that door, Patterson, or I'll smash it down."

He heard a shuddering sob from Patterson and then a window rose with a bang. Jerry grimaced, drew back and hunched his shoulder. He was light, but there was power behind his small shoulders. He hit the door three times before he felt it start to give. As he prepared for the fourth assault, he heard a single shot inside the room. He hesitated, cocked his head and listened. He heard a slithering sound from beyond the door and then a thump. He didn't wait any longer. He went through the door in two more husky shoves.

RON PATTERSON lay just beneath the open window. His body was hunched in a ball and there was a bluish hole between his eyes from which blood was beginning to ooze. There was an automatic pistol lying on the floor beside him.

Jerry knelt, felt for a pulse he knew wouldn't be there, and arose slowly. Something buzzed past his ear like an angry hornet and smashed into the wall behind him. The flat report of a gun out-

side came simultaneously. He gave a leap to one side, lunged across the room and turned off the lights. Then he carefully approached the window again. He raised his head cautiously, peered out into the darkness and saw no one.

There was a huge, thick-foliaged oak tree just outside the window which blocked his view. By this time the killer would have a good start. To look for him would be a waste of time. Jerry sprinted out of the room, ran downstairs and looked for the attorney.

Townsend wasn't in the library. Jerry's lips tightened. After all, the lawyer, so far as he knew now, was the only man who could realize what Jerry's revelation had done to young Patterson. If the lawyer was in any way mixed up in the case, he'd have been forced to show his hand quickly.

A door banged somewhere at the rear of the house. Townsend, his usually neat gray hair awry, came barging through the house.

"What happened? I saw the lights in Ron's room go out. I heard shots!"

Jerry calmly parked himself on the arm of a chair. "Ron Patterson is dead. It looks like suicide, but I'll swear it isn't because somebody took a shot at me from outside. We've got to call in the police now, and I'm going to suggest that you handle nothing until they get here. They'll want to take a paraffin test of your hands. If you fired a gun, Mr. Townsend, it will take a lot of explaining."

Townsend flushed. "But, great heavens, I didn't kill him. Why should I? He was my client. Look here, whoever you are, I'm ready to tell all I know. It's not a complete story because young Patterson didn't tell me everything. It concerns the estate his father left. That was entirely in cash from an insurance policy. Immediately after the funeral Ron came to my office with the check and asked me to get it cashed, which I did. He took the money over my protests that a hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars was too much to carry

around. I heard nothing more until tonight when he phoned me and asked me to rush over here. I arrived no more than five minutes ahead of you."

Jerry picked up the phone. "Before I call the police, maybe you can tell me how a man as broke as Patterson was, could pay the premiums on a policy that size. You were his attorney; you ought to know."

"But I don't," Townsend protested. "The policy premium was paid annually. Two years ago he barely realized enough cash from certain investments which he sold, to pay the policy to date. Last year he borrowed to the limit on the policy itself. This year he had nothing, yet he paid the premium—exactly on the day it was due. He must have borrowed the money somewhere."

"With what security?" Jerry asked derisively as he dialed Headquarters. "Patterson couldn't have borrowed a dime and you know it. Hello? Get me Sergeant Orr of Homicide. Orr? Jerry Wade! There's been a killing at Hugh Patterson's place . . . Yeah, the man who was buried this afternoon. It's his son. Okay, see you in a few minutes."

Sergeant Orr didn't waste any time. He arrived amidst a wail of sirens, rushed into the house and listened to Jerry's story. He called on one of his men from the fingerprint division and had him take a test of Attorney Townsend's hands.

"I'll stake my reputation that this man didn't fire a gun in the last few hours," the expert reported. "Unless he had a chance to wash his hands in ether."

Jerry walked over to Townsend. "I'm sorry if I seemed to imply an accusation, but it was for your own good to have those hands tested. Now you're in the clear. Suppose I see you in the morning and we'll really go into details about this mess?"

"Perhaps," Townsend said stiffly, "I shall be available."

Jerry grinned at him, went upstairs and watched an assistant medical ex-

aminer go over the corpse. Then a detective began searching young Patterson's pockets, piling the contents on the floor. Jerry flipped through the papers. There was a small black memo pad, embossed with the name of a firm:

COMPLIMENTS OF THE NATIONAL
LOAN COMPANY

Jerry flipped the pages. They were blank. He examined the other papers, mostly old letters and estate listings. The backs of all of these were covered with undecipherable notes and scribblings.

"That's funny," Jerry muttered. "Young Patterson certainly believed in making plenty of notes, but he never used this book expressly made for that purpose. I wonder why?"

"You say something?" Sergeant Orr asked. "Look, Wade, I don't want to be tough, but you and Townsend are the only witnesses. I could hold you. Therefore you better open up and come clean. So far I know four things. Young Patterson is dead. The boys say his prints were on the gun and nobody else's. The rod belonged to his father. There's a bullet hole in the wall which you say was fired from outside, but if it was, the slug would have hit the ceiling."

Jerry pointed.

"There's a big tree just outside the window," he said. "The killer might have been hiding in it. Anyhow, I'll tell you everything if you'll give me a couple of hours to get the proof. So far there isn't enough evidence to warrant police action."

SERGEANT ORR gave forth a disgusted growl, but he waved his hand in acquiescence.

Jerry literally tore out of the house. He ran around to the back, stood directly beneath the big oak and looked up. He dragged one of the lower branches toward him, rubbed leaves between his fingers and whistled softly. Then he raced to the street and sent his coupe rolling toward Leon Hayes' funeral

home. He hated to stall Sergeant Orr, but Jerry felt that the case had to be handled very discreetly until it was ready to be blown wide open.

The man who admitted Jerry was a narrow-faced, beady-eyed individual of about thirty-five.

His skin was sallow and unhealthy looking.

"Has Mr. Hayes returned yet?" Jerry asked.

"No. I'm Vogel, his assistant, Mr. Hayes phoned about thirty minutes ago and said he was going away for a few days. Is there something I can do?"

"Hayes—phoned?" Jerry gasped. "Are you sure?"

Vogel drew himself up. "Of course, I'm sure. I have worked for Mr. Hayes seven years. Don't you believe I know his voice? He's been very tired lately and suddenly decided to take a vacation. Just why do you ask?"

Jerry elbowed Vogel aside, walked into the office and looked up Hayes' home number. He dialed it, heard the connection made, but there was no answer.

"I might have added," Vogel said over Jerry's shoulder, "that Mrs. Hayes has accompanied him also. Now, is there anything else that you want?"

Jerry got up and jerked down the peak of his hat.

"Nothing else right now, but later, Mr. Vogel, later on there may be plenty."

He hurried back to his car and got in without noticing the windows had been raised. As he pulled away from the curb he saw Vogel standing on the big porch, and Jerry didn't like the way he smiled. So Hayes had gone away on a vacation. Jerry snorted at the idea. Hayes had been snatched, probably murdered. Somehow, his wife had been tricked into leaving the city also, unless —Jerry whistled to himself—Hayes was really in on this business and was one of those who would profit by the venture.

Jerry was driving along one of the avenues leading into the city proper.

There was little traffic at this hour, and he was deep in thought. He coughed suddenly and felt an urge to draw in a lungful of fresh air. He reached for the window ratchet, found that it turned loosely, but didn't control the window. He frowned, leaned over to the other door and tried to open that window just as unsuccessfully. Then he grabbed the door handle—and it dropped off in his hand.

The headlights of the car were stabbing the darkness ahead of him, but they began to flicker like a candle in a wind. Everything converged into a spinning circle of light that faded and faded. Jerry was gasping for air.

He reached down to turn off the switch. The front wheels bumped over the curb, ran across the sidewalk and hit a tree head on.

There was no loud crash for Jerry had automatically started to brake the car as he felt his wits slipping away from him. His fingers touched the key, fumbled for a moment and then slid off.

His arm hung limply as he sagged over the wheel.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEATH CAR



CHRISTINE had seen Jerry emerge from his apartment, but she wisely had kept out of sight. At a safe distance she trailed him in her own car and parked two blocks away when he stopped in front of Patterson's home.

All along Chris had an idea that Jerry was somehow concerned with the dead man whose picture he had taken only a few hours before. Now she was positive. Minutes passed and Chris became restless. Jerry was rash sometimes and would wade into a pack of trouble as eagerly as he'd take photos of important news events. Then a shot broke the stillness. Then another. Christine turned pale.

But nothing else happened until a siren's wail broke the silence of this quiet neighborhood. Christine saw Sergeant Orr jump out of a car and rush into the house. Orr was a big man and there was no mistaking his identity. Chris heaved a sigh of relief, for the arrival of Sergeant Orr was a good indication that Jerry had called him. Therefore, Jerry couldn't very well be in danger.

Ten minutes later Jerry came running from the house, jumped into his car and drove away quickly. Chris started after him and was forced to drop back even more when they hit the avenues to the outskirts. The route was familiar. It was the same way they'd taken to reach the funeral home. Chris decided that this must be his destination. She saw him park directly in front of the place. Instead of stopping her own car, Chris drove slowly by the big house.

Two shadowy forms were slinking from behind tall hedges that encircled the place. They saw Christine's car and ducked back. Chris rolled on by, turned the next corner and stopped. She got out, hurried back to the street on which the funeral home was located and peered down it. Jerry's car was in plain sight and so were those two men who had ducked out of sight. They were doing something to the car. One crouched behind it while the other had one of the coupe's doors open.

It was a trap of some kind. Christine bit her lip in exasperation. She couldn't try to warn Jerry now. If she frightened those two men away, they might take more direct action if this plan failed. She was reasonably sure they were not engaged in planting a bomb for that required the raising of the hood, and this hadn't been done.

She crept down the street, staying close to the line of shade trees at the curbing. These gave her ample protection, and if she could get close enough to see exactly what the skulkers were up to—or could stop Jerry in time—they might both get clear.

She darted toward a huge tree, watching Jerry's car so intently that she failed to realize her own danger. Someone moved out from behind that same tree. Christine heard soft footsteps behind her and started to turn as a hand was clapped across her mouth. At the same instant she felt a gun digging into her ribs.

"Now be nice and stop kicking," a man's voice warned harshly, "or I'll knock you cold, baby. I'm not fooling."

Chris realized that. She ceased struggling and only winced when her arm was seized, jerked behind her back and held there in an excruciatingly painful position. Her captor proved to be a chunky, broad-faced thug who seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

"We'll go back to where you parked the buggy, babe," he said with a grin. "We'll get in and go for a little ride, huh? I'll do the driving, and listen—try one phony trick and I'll rub you out. Don't think I'm afraid to do it."

The girl gulped. She knew the type to which this mug belonged. If he did shoot her, he'd only be the mechanical device that pulled the trigger. Someone directed this man's movements and provided the brain he lacked. This didn't make Christine's position any the less dangerous; if anything it augmented the chances of her getting shot.

The thug let go of her arm, backed into the car and kept a short-barreled, nickel-plated revolver trained on her. When he settled himself behind the wheel, he indicated that she was to get in, too. Christine obeyed. If there was the barest chance of getting clear, she would have taken it, for Jerry was in danger also. But one look at her captor indicated that he'd squeeze the trigger of his gun with no more regard than if he were firing at a wooden dummy.

"Where are we going?" she asked calmly.

The thug started the car and pulled away from the curb. "Look," he said out of the corner of his mouth, "I don't want to hurt you, see? Orders is orders,

so don't get smart or I'll plug you just like I was told. We'll just go some place and park for a little while. Remember, this roscoe in my mitt is primed to go off quick and I'm only driving with one hand."

CHRISTINE closed her eyes and sighed. She reached up to remove her hat and instantly the gun jabbed her ribs. Then, after the killer saw her intention, he nodded permission. Christine untied the ribbon that passed under her chin, put the hat in her lap and with a quick side glance at the thug, tied both ends of the ribbon together.

They were heading into town now. Traffic lights showed like a string of rubies and emeralds along the wide avenues. They were apparently heading for some hideout which necessitated passing through town. Christine watched her captor intently.

"So somebody told you to do this," she said in a steady voice. "Now suppose you were forced to kill me. Would that same person take your place in the electric chair? Listen, lion heart, I'm a reporter. I'm one of the few women reporters who ever saw an execution. I watched six of 'em go. Each one was worse than the last."

"We don't print all that happens in that little room. It would make a lot of people sick to read it. And the bigger the dopes are, the tougher it is when the juice starts shooting through them. Now you, for instance; ten months ago I watched a fellow just about your build being—"

"Shut up!" the gunman rasped. "Keep your trap closed or I'll bust you one. I don't scare, sister. If they led me to the chair tomorrow, I'd go out spitting in their eyes, see."

Christine exhaled deeply. "That's what all of them said. They're brave enough until that door opens and then—well, I shiver just looking at the chair."

The killer stopped the car with a jerk, narrowly missing a collision with a sedan ahead of him. The red traffic light

cast an eerie glow across his face. Christine leaned forward slightly and her hat rested against the dashboard. Beneath it, her hands were very busy. The dash throttle had a flared knob at the end and she quickly wound the ribbon of her hat around this, knotting it carefully.

"I'm sorry," she told the driver. "I guess I talked out of turn, but I don't want to die any more than you do. Suppose you were to let me have it—right here? How far do you think you'd get before the cops hunted you down? While you were running, you'd pray one of the slugs would kill you quickly so there wouldn't be that long agony of waiting until the night they come for you."

The driver shifted gears and watched Christine narrowly. Whenever he used the shift, he had to rest his gun on his lap, but he could grab it in a split-second.

"One more crack outa you," he growled, "and so help me, I'll sock you. That's the last warnin'."

They rolled down the avenue again. There were traffic cops on almost every corner now. The thug gripped his pistol again and made sure he drove carefully. Four blocks farther the traffic signals turned red. The thug laid the gun on his lap, reached for the gear shift to throw it into neutral. Christine pulled hard at the ribbon attached to the dash throttle, jerking it all the way out. Instantly the car jerked forward just as though the driver had tramped on the floor accelerator with all his strength.

He gave a hoarse yell, grabbed for the wheel with both hands and tried to jam on the brake. It was too late. There were several cars ahead of him, stopped at the intersection, and he crashed into one of them. Fenders crumpled! Someone screamed! A patrolman whirled around and began running toward the scene. The thug reached for his gun, found it gone and himself staring into the wrong end of it. Christine was smiling gently at his dismay.

"I just wanted to be sure you'd never take that last mile walk because of

murdering me," she said.

The thug gulped, grabbed the door handle and hurled himself out of the car. He saw the approaching patrolman, changed his course and streaked for an alley. Christine hastily thrust the gun down under the cushions of her car, slid behind the wheel and backed up. The driver of the car she hit came barging over. Christine had no time to waste. She turned in the middle of the street, stepped on the gas hard, and in the rear view mirror saw the other driver shaking his fist.

Chris squeezed every ounce of power out of the car. She had to reach Jerry before he drove away. As she turned into the wide street on which the funeral home was located, she caught a glimpse of a tail light vanishing far up the road. Jerry's car was gone from in front of the house. He hadn't passed her so he must be heading in the opposite direction.

Chris let her car roll again, began gaining on the tail light ahead of her. A moment later she recognized the car as Jerry's. She frantically pushed the horn button down, began blinking her headlights, doing everything to attract his attention, but for some reason he didn't heed the signals.

Then she saw the car swerve once, go back on its normal course for a block and then swerve again. Finally it slowed a little, headed straight toward the sidewalk and piled up against a tree. Christine stopped directly behind it, jumped out and ran up to it. She peered inside and saw Jerry slumped over the wheel. She beat on the windows with her fists.

"Jerry! Jerry!"

HE DIDN'T move, and Christine suddenly knew what horror was. She grabbed at the door handle, but it refused to budge. Whirling, she raced back to her own car, raised the front seat and drew out a heavy jack. She was already swinging this as she ran back. It struck the door window, smashed it through, and acrid fumes swept out. Jerry

groaned, coughed and moved. Christine was banging on the door with the jack, making the opening larger. Then she ran around to the other side of the coupé, tried the door handle and it opened. She slid over beside Jerry, eased him back and placed his head against her shoulder. The fumes had all dissipated now. Jerry opened his eyes and mumbled something.

"You're all right, darling," Christine half-sobbed. "You're all right. I got here in time."

It took ten minutes before Jerry's wits returned entirely. He mopped his moist face and grinned weakly at Chris.

"So you didn't stay home like you promised. I guess I'm glad you didn't, Chris. Help me get out of the car so I can see what happened."

He was unsteady on his feet, but by bracing himself against the car, he made his way to the rear of it. He pointed to the exhaust pipe.

"Stuffed up! I suppose they cut a nice little hole in the exhaust right under me too, so I'd get the full benefit of the fumes. They fixed the windows and the doors so I couldn't open them from inside. They also knew I'd be in a hurry and wouldn't bother with the windows until it was too late. Two minutes more, Chris, and you'd have written another obit."

Christine shivered and gripped Jerry's arm tightly. "Please don't say that. Jerry, what is it all about? What do you know that makes them want to kill you? Also, am I in on it now? Have I earned the right to know everything?"

"You've certainly earned it," Jerry said. "Here's the dope. Hayes is missing. Whether he was snatched, murdered and his body taken, or just disappeared because he's in on the deal, I don't know. Patterson wasn't dead when we took that picture this afternoon, but he is now. Patterson's heir and son apparently committed suicide, although I'll bet my shirt he was murdered. Either way, that kid knew too much and for some reason was ready to break. The instant

I told him his father really was dead, he went berserk and ran upstairs. In his pocket I found this."

Jerry held out the small notebook. "Now here is why I think this clue is important. Young Patterson was in the habit of making copious notes. But he didn't use this book. Why? Because he just got it. There can be no other reason. Where did he get it from? From the National Loan Company. Now let's add two and two to make murder. If his father paid the premiums on a policy as big as the one he held, he must have obtained the money somewhere. What better place than a loan company, one specializing in giving out loans with insurance policies as collateral? The National Loan Company."

Christine grasped the significance immediately. "Then what are we waiting for? It's one-thirty in the morning and there's no better time to see what that loan outfit looks like—without their knowing we've been there."

Jerry grinned. "You're almost as smart as I am, Chris. I was thinking of the same thing right after I left Patterson's house. Got your burglar tools?"

CHAPTER V

THE GRAVE HAS NO SECRETS



UPON reaching the midtown section of the city, they stopped at an all-night restaurant, ate a hasty meal, then continued on their way.

The National Loan Company had a small office on the tenth floor of an ancient building far downtown. The lobby door was open and, with Chris beside him, Jerry climbed the stairs cautiously so that if there was a watchman, he wouldn't be aroused. They reached the office, and Jerry went to work. He tried the door first to be sure it was locked and that no one was inside. Then he took a thin, sharp table knife from his pocket.

"A souvenir from the one-arm joint,"

he told Chris in a whisper.

He thrust the blade through behind the wood door-stop, manipulated it a bit, and the snap lock was forced back by the flexibility of the knife. The door swung open.

"No lights," Jerry whispered. "They might have a guard posted outside."

Jerry used matches as he searched the place. There was a rickety old desk at one end of the office. It was locked, but the table knife came into play once more, and two minutes later he had it open. He seized a checkbook, opened it and scanned the stubs.

"Have a look," he whispered to Christine. "Some loan company. They issued only four loans in three months and not one of 'em very big. Better take down these names. They are the men who borrowed the money."

Jerry read off three of the names while Chris wrote them down. He named the fourth man, and Christine gasped.

"Did you say Alfred Munsel? Jerry, he was just like Patterson. He used to be a big man, a financier before he lost his shirt. Been on the rocks ever since the war."

Jerry frowned as he carefully replaced the checkbook. He searched a filing cabinet but found nothing further of interest. They left the office with little trace of their entry, and the press photographer helped Chris into her car.

"Too late to do anything more tonight so I'll take you home. Now don't argue. We both need sleep, and you can't barge around waking up people at this hour of the morning."

He dropped Christine at her apartment and then drove over to the office of the syndicate for which he worked. Despite the hour, the place was humming with activity. One of the two rewrite men on duty, was Pop Baker, a venerable old man who looked more like a banker than a newspaperman. Jerry nodded to him, went down the hall, hauled out clippings from the morgue and went to work. It was almost dawn when he finished, but there was a glint

of satisfaction in his eyes. The four men to whom the loans had been made were all dead—and each one had succumbed to the same disease, pneumonia. Alfred Munsel had died only four days before.

As he returned through the office, Pop Baker had finished his trick and was just putting on his coat. Jerry stopped and regarded Pop Baker quizzically.

"You've been an inside man for years, Pop. How would you like a little work on the outside? Maybe with a bit of danger thrown in?"

Pop Baker was at once interested. "Wade, I'd risk my neck for some excitement. It's not fair to take a man who's been a leg man for thirty years and put him inside like this. You got something up your sleeve?"

Jerry shook his head. "Not tonight. Maybe a lot of trouble later, if things work out. Tomorrow I'll call on you."

A few hours' sleep gave Jerry sufficient rest. Still using Christine's car, he drove straight out to the Alfred Munsel home before breakfast and rang the bell. Like Patterson's home, it had once been a show place which had been allowed to run down for lack of money to keep up repairs. A woman dressed in black let him in, and she was joined by a scowling, lanky man who introduced himself as Nick Fenton, the widow's brother.

"A newspaper man to see me?" Mrs. Munsel looked puzzled. "I don't know why I'd be of interest to the newspapers."

Jerry let them have it, both barrels. "Your husband died of pneumonia a few days ago. He left plenty of insurance. Too much for a man of his circumstances."

"Just a minute!" Nick Fenton broke in angrily. "I don't know what you're up to young man, but Alfred Munsel was once a very wealthy man, fully able to pay the premiums on policies up to a million dollars if necessary. It's true that he met with business reverses and, except for the insurance, died very nearly bankrupt. However, he paid his pre-

miums up to date. We're expecting the man from the insurance company now. We thought you were that man. They have held up payment of the claim for some reason. He is going to explain why."

"I hope he comes," Jerry said, "because what I have to tell you will also interest him. I'm making no accusations, mind you, but it sounds pretty raw."

THE door bell buzzed. Nick Fenton answered it and led an impeccably dressed, middle-aged man into the room.

The newcomer was the very essence of fashion, with a crease in his trousers that put Jerry's clothing to shame. He wore a white gardenia in his buttonhole and a neatly folded pocket handkerchief peeped out of his breast pocket. There was a white smudge on his coat, another on his pants. It looked as though he had tried to rub the spots off and had only partially succeeded.

"This," Fenton announced, "is Mr. Imbrie, representing the Woodrow Life and Accident Insurance Company."

Jerry shook hands and found that Imbrie had a strong grip.

"Mr. Fenton tells me you represent a news syndicate and are here about something to do with Mr. Munsel's death," Imbrie said, as he sat down.

Jerry nodded. "I'll give it to you straight. I don't think Alfred Munsel is dead at all. I think the man buried in his grave is a substitute."

Mrs. Munsel gave a gasp of horror. Fenton hurried to her side. Imbrie half rose from his chair. Then he motioned Jerry into the next room.

"Look here," he said in a low tone, "what have you got to prove all this? Frankly, we're a little suspicious, too. Five men have died recently, all of them broke except for the insurance policies they held with my company. I'm not an agent. I'm head of the Woodrow Company's investigation division. I held up the settlement of this claim."

"Good," Jerry said. "Then you can

make a formal protest and have the body of Alfred Munsel exhumed—if Munsel is buried in that grave. I can't tell you anything more, but I'd strongly advise this action. Tell the widow unless she gives her consent, you'll go to the district attorney and get a court order. While you're handling that detail, I've got to make a phone call."

Imbrie hurried away, and Jerry Wade dialed Christine's apartment. She answered instantly, as though she'd been sitting beside the phone.

"Now, listen to me, Jerry Wade," she informed him, "you're not going to make me take a back seat. You're working on the case and it's only fair that I should be along."

"Sure," Jerry chuckled. "I'll pick you up in fifteen minutes. We're going out to the cemetery and dig up Munsel's body. Ought to be interesting. I don't blame you for wanting to come."

He heard a groan from the other end of the wire. Then Christine said, apologetically:

"Well, I have things to catch up on. Maybe I'll let you go alone—but only to the cemetery. When you're finished there, you pick me up or—or—"

"Okay, darling. If things happen as I expect, I'll be needing you for a very special job. Sure you don't want to come out and watch? It won't be bad. The guy has only been dead four or five days."

Christine hung up. Jerry Wade met Imbrie, Fenton and Mrs. Munsel in the hallway. They were putting on their coats.

"They've wisely agreed to go through with it, Wade," Imbrie said. "We'll proceed to the cemetery at once, and I certainly hope you're not wrong. There might be grounds for a civil action if you are."

Imbrie had a sedan outside, but Jerry drove Christine's car, following Imbrie to the cemetery. There were formalities at the superintendent's office, and then two men were assigned to do the exhumation. Jerry waited quietly to one

side until the casket was raised. Imbrie lifted the lid. Mrs. Munsel looked inside, then turned away quickly, sobbing.

Jerry stepped over beside Fenton. "It isn't Munsel, is it?" he asked.

FENTON turned a bitter face toward Jerry. "I was a fool to consent to this sacrilege. Of course, that's Munsel! I—I never thought that it wouldn't be. Satisfied now, you snooping reporter? We're not! You haven't heard the end of this."

Fenton was sweating visibly. He mopped his face, turned and strode away. Jerry gave a long sigh, leaned up against a tombstone and closed his eyes wearily. Then he had an idea. He warned the grave diggers not to inter the casket, rushed over to the cemetery superintendent's office and called the medical examiner. No one but Jerry Wade could have compelled that official to rush over and go to work.

Jerry met him forty minutes later, in the superintendent's office.

"Wade," the medical examiner said gravely, "you've gotten yourself into a mess. You've put me in the same doghouse. You've never slipped up before and I took you at your word. When the relatives of that dead man hear I did an autopsy in the cemetery receiving vaults, they won't like it and I won't blame them. Look, that man is Munsel. I knew him slightly. Also, he actually died of pneumonia, which is listed on the death certificate. All I hope is that you have an out for me and for yourself."

Jerry walked slowly back to Christine's car and piled in. This development made the outlook serious, but Jerry was far from finished. He had to act swiftly, before Mrs. Munsel filed a formal complaint. If his ideas worked out, he'd be secure. If they failed—Jerry shuddered. It looked like the finish of a good newspaper photographer who couldn't stop himself from turning detective.

CHAPTER VI

THE BAITED TRAP



ORTUNATELY Jerry had friends in every quarter of the city, men who would go far out of their way to help him. Shortly after noon he emerged from one of the big business buildings with certain papers stowed away in his pocket, a life policy and premium receipts from insurance officials glad to cooperate. He picked up Pop Baker and drove to Christine's apartment.

"Now," he concluded after he told them the bizarre events of the morning, "you can see what a spot I'm on. I've got theories, but no proof, and without proof I'm licked. Therefore, Pop, you're going to become Joseph Van Valken. He used to be a rich man and when he lost his dough, he went crazy. He's confined to an asylum, but very few people know this.

"You're insured for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars and the premium due date is tomorrow. You'll present yourself at the National Loan Company's offices this afternoon as soon as we fix you up a little. Ask for a loan so you can pay the premium on your policy. From there on, let nature take its course."

"What about me?" Christine cried. "Don't I fit in anywhere?"

"You," Jerry grinned, "are Joseph Van Valken's only child. His estate is in the hands of a bank, but I've arranged permission for you to move in. This is a neat little trap. If it springs at the right time, we'll be on top of the world. If it doesn't we'll be in jail—if we're lucky."

"If we're lucky?" Pop grimaced. "What happens if we're not?"

"They'll write nice things about us in the newspapers with a black-bordered box around the item. If you don't want to go through with it, now is the time to back out, Pop."

Baker made a derisive sound. "Me back out? Why, my blood is running faster right now than it has in years. You couldn't make me back out, Wade. Let's have all the gruesome details."

Pop Baker's eyes grew wide as he listened. The grin on his face died away. This was danger, but it appealed to him. Jerry had him dress in clothing that, while neat, had seen better days. Armed with the insurance policy, Pop ventured out. Jerry watched him go and he shook his head sadly.

"I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to Pop. Or to you, Chris. Both of you will be fighting against a band of men who will stop at nothing. So far as you're concerned, I'll be close by, but Pop'll have to face those tigers alone. If they get wise to the setup, I hate to think of what will happen. We'd better get on down to Van Valken's house so you'll be familiar with the layout."

Pop Baker walked the two miles to the financial district, located the proper office building and went in. He surveyed the entrance of the National Loan Company's offices, stroked his chin and then shrugged. After all, what did he have to lose? Pop opened the door and stepped up to a small desk at which a skinny-faced, droopy-eyed man sat playing solitaire. He hastily swept the cards into a desk drawer and smirked at Pop.

"What is it, brother? Short of dough?"

Pop nodded. "I'd like to see the man in charge. I need some money—very quickly."

Pop was escorted inside the railing and left alone while the solitaire-playing office boy vanished into the private office. Somehow Pop had the idea he was being watched. He could see no one, nor hear any sound, but that feeling persisted. So he did a little acting for the benefit of his unseen observers. He took out the insurance papers, opened them up and began shaking his head sadly, like a man who was at the end of his rope without another piece of hemp in sight.

The office boy returned, and two minutes later Pop was seated in front of the old desk in the inner office, absorbing every detail of the man who sat behind it. The loan shark, who gave his name as Dexter, was a brutal-looking man with heavy eyebrows that continued in a straight line directly across the forehead. He had enormous hands, a bull neck, and, for contrast, only a friar's fringe of hair around his head.

"How much do you want, pal?" he asked. "We don't have no red tape around here. A guy who looks good to me gets the dough—provided of course, he's got some collateral. The law says we can't take unsecured loans. Just tell me your troubles, pal."

Pop looked up and then dropped his eyes again. "Well, it isn't much I need. Not so long ago I'd have spent that sum during a two weeks' vacation and thought nothing of it. My name is Van Valken. I—I was a financier. You may have heard of me. All I have left now is my insurance policy. Tomorrow is the last day of grace. I've tried everywhere, but I can't raise the quarterly premium. I've borrowed on the policy to its full extent already. There is still plenty of equity, but if I don't pay up at once the only thing left for me is the paid-up clause which reduces the value too much."

THE manager showed decided interest. "You got the policy with you? Say, this is the right place. We make a specialty in them kind of loans."

He spread the policy on his desk, studied it a moment and nodded. "Okay, Mr. Van Valken, we'll take care of it. Give you a little extra money if you want. We'll take care of the next three installments, too, if you show up and sign the notes—but wait a minute. How do I know you really are Van Valken? Tell you what—you signed this policy, so just sit down and scribble your name a few times. Write some words to prove your handwriting is exactly the same."

Old Pop Baker wasn't worried about

that because he, of course, had signed the policy himself. It would have taken more observant eyes than Dexter's to have noticed that while the policy was dated years back, the ink of the signatures was fresh. Pop wrote his assumed name on a pad, scribbled a few words and passed them over to the manager.

"That's swell," Dexter said. "Now one more thing and you get the check. Your daughter is the beneficiary, so she ought to know about this. You can call her on this phone. Say just this—that you've got what you needed, and she is to do exactly as your friend, Mr. Dexter, says when he calls on her."

Pop shrugged and obeyed in the manner of a man who'd go through with anything just to get the worry of that insurance policy off his mind. He phoned Van Valken's home and heaved a sigh of mental relief when Christine answered. He delivered his message, hung up and arose.

"I'm very grateful," he said to Dexter. "I'd borrowed on the policy naturally, but there is still a very good equity in it. Worth over a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars the moment I die. If I lost that, my daughter would be destitute. Thank you again."

The big man behind the desk shook hands with Pop, grinning like a well pleased hyena.

"Sure, that's okay, Mr. Van Valken. We like customers like you. Now of course I got to see your daughter so she'll sign one of these notes, too. Not that I think anything is going to happen to you. Man, you look as healthy as a two-year-old colt. It's only that if them officials come snooping, everything is on the up-and-up. You signed a note that if you don't pay up, we can cash in your policy. If—well, if you don't live to pay us, we must have your daughter's note to secure her promise to pay us out of the insurance. Easy as that, Mr. Van Valken. Say, suppose I have one of the boys drive you home?"

Pop decided not to take the bait. He was getting out of this with a whole

skin and felt himself lucky. He declined the offer, plodded out of the office, reached the street and turned north. He took no chances and kept on walking slowly so that if anyone trailed him, he'd still be acting his part. Pop felt inclined to phone Jerry, but he restrained the impulse. Telephone booths have thin walls. Nothing must happen at this stage of the grim game.

A car pulled out of traffic, slowed and rode along the curb beside him as he walked. The tonneau door opened, and the face of the loan company's manager poked out.

"Mr. Van Valken," he called. "I'm on my way to your house to have your daughter sign. Come in and ride out with me, and I'll give you the check this afternoon."

Pop had a choice of two things—to cut and run for it and thus spoil Jerry's little trap—or risk his life by entering the car. Pop smiled and walked over to the car. He stepped in, found that there were two men in the rear seat. He let himself drop back against the cushions. Suddenly a hand clapped across his mouth, he saw a blackjack swing down. A violent thunderstorm broke in his brain and then a dark, deep cloud hung over everything. Pop just sighed and went limp.

The manager stroked his blackjack tenderly and grinned.

"There won't be a mark on him when he croaks," he gloated. "This is the best sapper I ever had. Head for the hospital, Mike. We gotta fix up a nice case of pneumonia for the poor sucker."

The other man in the back seat leaned forward and studied the unconscious victim's features. "Very good, Dex. We've already got a man who can be made up easily so no one can tell him from this old fool. Half a dozen more of these suckers and we'll have made ourselves a cool million without a single kickback from anybody. Only one thing worries me—there's a red-headed runt working on the case, a reporter and news photographer, Jerry Wade."

"He's a little fellow, but loaded with T.N.T. And no fool, either, Dex. Don't judge him wrong. If he should interfere at any time—use your gun and don't hesitate. You can have Mike let me out at the next corner. Cover our good friend Van Valken with the robe, but don't let him smother. He's really going to die of pneumonia."

CHAPTER VII

TO MAKE A MAN TALK



MEANWHILE, in setting this trap, Jerry and Christine had let themselves into Van Valken's house. The bank in charge of the property had maintained the completely furnished interior in the hope of selling the place. The furniture was dustless, the electric power turned on. Christine dropped into a comfortable chair.

"Jerry, I don't like this. Really I don't. Perhaps it's just a hunch, but Pop isn't a young man any more. I'm afraid for him."

Jerry Wade threw his hat onto a table and began pacing the floor. "So am I, Chris. But we had to have a man for the part, and Pop filled it completely. If he comes through, I'll see that he gets enough out of it to retire for life. Anyway, it's too late now. He's already arranging that loan and unless I miss my guess, the crooks are falling for his line. The setup can stand any amount of checking. You know your part and I'm all ready."

Wade hauled out his Leica, set the lens and adjusted the special flood lights in the room and patted the camera lovingly.

"If I get the pictures okay, we'll have these birds by the scruff of the neck. They'll show up quickly and when they do, lead them into the study. There are a lot of heavy drapes all around and I'll be back of one of them. Keep tapping a pencil on the table so they won't hear

the click of the camera. Whatever they demand, you are to refuse. That will force their hand."

Christine peeled off her coat, arranged her hair and walked into the study. Jerry pulled down the curtains, arranged floor lamps to throw off their brightest light and focused his camera several times from different angles. There'd be no time for any of this once those men appeared.

Two hours went by, and Jerry smoked his twentieth cigarette, throwing the previous butts out of the window so there would be no trace of his presence.

Then the phone rang. Christine answered it, hung up and looked worried.

"It was Pop. He said some friend by the name of Dexter is going to call on me and I am to do whatever this man says."

Jerry looked pleased. "They've taken the bait. It won't be long now."

Another hour crawled by and then the doorbell buzzed. Jerry stepped close to Chris, looked at her and smiled a little. Then he kissed her lightly and vanished behind the drapes.

Christine went to the door and admitted the man called Dexter. She was a little shocked by his appearance, for Dexter looked more simian than human. He removed his hat and bowed stiffly.

"I'm Mr. Dexter, the man your father phoned about, Miss Van Valken. Maybe we better go inside, huh? What I got to tell you is private."

Christine led him into the study and indicated the chair he was to occupy. She seated herself at the table, picked up a pencil and began tapping it. Mr. Dexter cleared his throat.

"It's this way, Miss," he began. "Your father is getting old, see. He's just about busted, or maybe you know that already. Anyhow, he got a plan for himself. Now he phoned you and told you to trust me so you know this is no stall."

"Get down to facts, man." Christine drummed with her pencil monotonously. "I know Dad is desperate. What's he up to now?"

"He's going to die," he said, grinning broadly, as Christine jerked erect in alarm. "Now take it easy. He ain't really going to die, see. There's another guy who hasn't got any money either and no chances of getting any. Your father made arrangements so this poor guy's wife and kids will get a little dough to keep 'em from starving. Here's how it works. This guy dies because nothing can save him. He's got pneumonia.

"Well, we bring his body to your house after you go to the morgue and identify him as your father. Get it? You report your father missing right now. Day after tomorrow go to the morgue and pick him out. He'll look like your father, too—so much that you won't have to be play-acting when you start to bawl. Everything will be in order. Any doc can sign the death certificate and we got the right undertaker.

"File his death and your claim with the insurance company. They'll settle fast because we've already paid the premium. Then you just sit tight. Pretty soon you'll hear from your father by letter or by phone. He'll tell you how much money to send him. The rest you keep. A couple of years go by. Then you sell this place and go away. Join him and you can both live swell from then on. How's it sound?"

"Crooked," Christine snapped. "Crooked as an Indian trail, but I know just how desperate Dad is and I'll go along with him. Give me all the details."

Dexter pulled his chair closer, hauled out a folded piece of paper and opened it wide. He placed this on the desk.

"You sign this note, pledging us a ten percent cut for handling things. Then report your father missing and wait. That's all there is to it."

CHRISTINE read over the form. It was for ten per cent, all right, but the figures were penciled in and could be changed to one hundred per cent without leaving the slightest trace. Exactly what good this would do the murder mob she didn't know. Certainly they

couldn't hope to collect legally by it. Jerry's instructions were clearly impressed in her mind. She must force this man to compel her to sign the paper while Jerry got his pictures. Shots like that would stand up in court.

She flipped the paper away from her. "If you want me to sign anything like that bring my father here. A few days more won't make any difference, and I don't particularly trust you. That's final, so don't begin arguing."

Dexter's grin died away to be replaced by a scowl that made Christine gulp. This man certainly wasn't one to cross. His right hand darted toward his coat and he drew a gun so fast that Christine didn't even notice where he had kept it holstered.

"You dumb dame," he snarled. "Didn't your old man tell you to do like I said? You'll do it, or I'll put a slug through your head. Now sign that paper and no more argument! We're trying to help your old man, and you start to act like this. It ain't right."

Christine picked up the pen, tapped it thoughtfully on the desk a few times and heard the distant click of a camera shutter. She had a momentary glimpse of Jerry's encouraging nod. She scrawled on the paper and shoved it toward Dexter.

The front door banged, and she started up. The loan shark's gun motioned that she was to sit down again.

"It's just one of my boys," he explained. "I pushed the night lock open on the door when I came in. He's a witness, see. He signs this, too, and then it's nice and legal. You just wait. You'll see I'm trying to help you."

A man came running into the room, and Christine's heart sank. He saw her and stopped dead in his tracks, his jaw sagging. Then he raised a hand. His finger pointed squarely at her. This was the thug she had outwitted as he drove her through the city.

"That dame! She's a copper or something," the thug yelled. "She was tailing that newspaper guy when I grabbed her.

She got away from me like I told you, Dex."

Dexter's gun centered on Christine's chest.

"So! A stool pigeon!" he shouted. "A pal of that Jerry Wade, huh? Maybe this whole thing is a setup. That old guy who said he was Van Valken fell too easy, but, sister, it won't do you or him a bit of good. You croak now; he gets his later on. Nobody can double-cross me and get away with it."

He was deliberately taunting Christine, trying to make her show abject fear so he could gloat before he pressed the trigger. Like all criminals with a gun, he gloried in the power he held, the measure of life and death he alone could bestow.

The other thug walked behind the desk. Suddenly he reached beneath his coat and drew a knife.

Like a cat he began stalking his way toward the drapes.

"There's a guy hiding behind them curtains," he growled. "Better be ready, Dex. He might have a gat."

Dexter suddenly felt stunned. Any man hiding in this room would be bound to have a gun. Perhaps there were half a dozen men. He arose, kicked his chair back and forgot about Christine. Because she was a woman, he took it for granted she was too weak and puny to cause any trouble.

The other thug made a dive for the drapes, bringing his knife up in a savage thrust straight for a bulge in the curtains. The blade slashed through the heavy material. Then one of the drapes collapsed, falling completely over the thug. Dex had a blurred vision of a small, compact, red-headed form hurtling toward him. He raised his gun and tightened the finger against the trigger.

Something struck him a slashing blow across the face, carving a chunk of flesh away and letting blood seep down into his eyes. Everything was obscured by a crimson mist. He yelled curses as he tried to pull the trigger and then

the savage fury that had stormed his way was upon him. The gun was knocked out of his hand.

A FIST smacked squarely against his nose. He staggered back, tripped over the fallen chair and fell heavily. But that fall jarred him badly. He wiped blood out of his eyes, drew back his lips in a snarl and suddenly kicked the chair straight toward Jerry's legs. Jerry, intent on leaping over the chair and landing on his victim, saw the object too late. The heavy chair struck him hard and the momentum toppled him over. Dexter regained his feet, looked around for his gun and saw it two seconds after Christine made a lunge for the weapon. Dexter wanted no part of a gun in the hands of a woman—not one who fought like this blazing-eyed witch.

He turned and ran crazily down the hall.

The front door was open and he went through it in a flash. Christine was at his heels. She leveled the gun and then shuddered. Shooting a man intent on killing her was one thing. Shooting that same man in the back was another. She lowered the weapon. Jerry reeled over to her side, but the loan shark was already in the car parked in front of the house and pulling away from the curb.

Jerry was panting and sweat beaded his face.

"Thanks, Chris. You're okay. The way you slugged that guy with the inkwell was neat and fast. If I ever want to keep you out of any cases from now on, remind me of that split-second back there. I'd have been a dead duck except for you."

He turned around. "We still have the knife artist who's your little pal. A workout and he'll squawk. I know the type and he's—"

A crash of breaking glass interrupted him. He streaked toward the study. The thug, engulfed in the folds of the drapery, had extricated himself somehow and plunged headlong through the window, glass and all.

They heard him barging through the brush outside. Jerry raced for the rear door, sprinted out onto the estate and spent ten minutes vainly looking for a trace of the thug. When he returned, his shoulders drooped badly.

"Why the dejection?" Christ asked. "We got what we were after. You have your pics. Unless I'm all wrong, any rogues' gallery will reveal that gorilla's mug."

"I know," Jerry said. "I have excellent pictures of him, but—now he'll disappear. Meanwhile, where is Pop? How can we help him? We don't even know where they've taken him, and you can bet your last nickel Pop isn't free. Chris, I've got to do something. There's no time to waste. They'll murder him the moment that gorilla springs the news of this trap."

JERRY began pacing the floor, rumpling his hair. Suddenly he swerved around and brought one clenched fist down on the desk.

"There's one chance, Chris. One chance so small I hate to think of it. They'll know Pop is a fake. They'll have to kill him to protect themselves. Listen, I must handle this job alone. Don't argue. I need you on the outside. Give me two hours. If I don't get in touch with you, call Sergeant Orr. Tell him to pick up an embalmer named Vogel who works at Leon Hayes' funeral home. I think he might know where they've taken Pop. Someone in that outfit belongs to the gang and Vogel is the best bet because he lied about Hayes' disappearance. You understand why I must Welch on that promise to let you work with me all the way through this case?"

"I'll be working with you, Jerry," Christine said. "Two hours to the minute I'll allow and no more. And, Jerry"—she put a hand on his arm—"please be careful."

Jerry scooped up his camera, raced out the back door again and into the garage where Christine's car was

parked. He was doing fifty, one block from the house. He streaked along the avenue toward the Hayes Funeral Home, his heart crammed with fury, his head reeling under the knowledge that every second meant that much less time for Pop Baker.

They'd have an ingenious way of killing him so there would be no comeback if they ever were captured. The manner by which they murdered their other victims indicated this very clearly.

He parked, raced up on the porch of the funeral home and doubled his fist. If Vogel answered the door and tried to slam it in his face, he'd knock him stiff.

But it was the old, stooped man who let him in. "Mr. Vogel? Yes, sir, he's here. Who shall I say is calling?"

Jerry realized this old man didn't even remember him from his first visit.

"Tell him it's Sergeant Orr of the Homicide Squad. I want him as a witness to an accident case. Maybe he didn't even see it, but I want to talk to him, anyhow."

Jerry Wade entered Hayes' office, wondering what had really become of the undertaker. The case had taken several puzzling turns. Jerry knew in a general fashion just how they operated, but there were still details lacking to make the case dovetail.

Vogel came barging in. He saw the news photographer, gave a squeal of alarm and turned to run. Wade was after him in a flash. He hauled Vogel back, threw him into a chair and stood over him.

"You know why I came," he said. "Your next visitor will be the real Sergeant Orr and he'll have a murder warrant for you—unless you talk mighty straight and fast."

Vogel became ashen-faced. "But I—I haven't killed anybody. I—I haven't done anything. You got nothing on me. Nothing, do you hear?"

"Listen," Jerry said, "you embalmed the body of a man identified as Hugh

Patterson, knowing the corpse was not that of Hugh Patterson, and knowing that the dead man had been murdered. Yes, *murdered*, so stop shaking your head, because I can prove it! You overheard me talking to Hayes. You sent word to the proper people, and the fake corpse was removed from the vault and Patterson's real body put in its place."

"But you can't prove murder," Vogel objected strenuously. "You can't. Switching a corpse doesn't mean the chair, and that's all I'm afraid of. The man I embalmed really died of pneumonia. Nobody can prove differently."

"Sure," Jerry agreed. "I'll concede that, but Hugh Patterson didn't die of pneumonia. Maybe he would have, but there was no time. Pneumonia doesn't strike so swiftly. Therefore Patterson was poisoned! His body lies in the vault. I'll have it exhumed, autopsied, and then, Vogel, where will you be? Maybe you didn't actually kill him, but you're an accessory to murder, and juries have a habit of letting accomplices ride the lightning, too. In one minute I knock you cold and call Sergeant Orr."

"Wh-what do you want to know?" Vogel blubbered.

"Where is the hideout? Who heads the gang? Where have they taken their most recent sucker? You know the answers, so spill them and fast!"

"I—I don't know who's behind it. I swear I don't. I—I will tell you where their place is if you promise to give me twenty-four hours start. You will? I—I've got to believe you. There's a small hospital, a private one, way out on Eldsmere Lane. They take some of the men there. That's all I know. I was just paid to embalm certain bodies and not ask questions. I'll swear I'm innocent of any—"

Jerry's fist interrupted the rest of it. He massaged his knuckles and looked down at the unconscious Vogel.

"I'm almost sorry I promised you a twenty-four-hour start. All I can

do is hope you don't wake up until then."

CHAPTER VIII

PNEUMONIA BY ORDER


ACING out of the house, Jerry jumped into his car and burned the roads at sixty-five miles an hour toward the suburb. If only he was in time. Perhaps if he had worked on Vogel a little more, he might have wormed the identity of the ringleader from him, but Jerry already possessed a vague idea as to who that individual might be, and, for the moment, time was more precious to him than anything else.

Eldsmere Lane was a lonely spot with a small cottage at the mouth of it and a sanitarium, labeled Dr. Worthington's Nursing Home, at the blind end. Jerry leaped out of his car and darted through the brush surrounding the place. There were lights burning in some of the windows. He noticed that one of the second-story windows was wide open despite the chill which had settled down with the coming of darkness. Curtains blew in and out of that window. Once he saw a shadow pass the opening, but it was no one familiar to Jerry.

He dropped to all fours and crawled toward the place, selecting one of the darkened windows on the first floor. He tried it and groaned when he found it tightly sealed. He had to get into this place somehow, and still keep his presence a secret. There was a two-car garage at the rear. He investigated and discovered that a modern ambulance occupied half the space.

Jerry grinned tightly, raised the hood of the ambulance and broke a wire. He reached far up beneath the dash, found the siren switch and bared a portion of the wire leading into it. Then he quickly wound the other wire in place, and the siren started howling.

He darted out of the garage, raced up to the building and flattened himself against the side of it, just around the corner from the rear door. A moment later a man, dressed in a white uniform, came catapulting out, cursing with every step. In his haste he left the back door open, and Jerry slipped in quietly.

He opened the first door he saw, stepped into a dark room and made sure no one lurked there. He heard the orderly return to the house, grumbling to himself. Another voice barked.

"I dunno how it happened," the orderly protested. "The wires musta got crossed. I pulled 'em free. Fix 'em tomorrow."

"Very well," the other voice snapped. "Now get back to the patient. Give him ten minutes more of the fresh air treatment and then wrap him in the blanket again. He's got to be finished before morning—or very nearly so. That man is a setup and dangerous to us."

The sound of retreating feet reached Jerry, and then a grim silence, like that of death, held sway. Jerry removed his camera from his pocket, peeked out the door and edged his way toward the staircase leading to the second floor. He paused a moment, set his flash, aimed his camera and took a shot of a door labeled Dr. Worthington. He proceeded up the stairs, listening after each step. He could hear stertorous breathing, like that of a man trying to inhale with an obstruction in his throat. Jerry knew what that meant.

Someone hurriedly walked by the stair head, and Jerry ducked. Then he listened again, locating the sound of the hoarse breathing. It came from one of the rooms at the far end of the sanitarium. For one of the few times in his life Jerry wished that a gun rested in the palm of his hand. He had no idea how many men were in this place and to reach Pop and free him, meant stacking only his wits and strength against those unknown numbers.

A door closed down the hall. Jerry backed into a room, saw it was empty, then left the door open and waited. A husky man in a white uniform walked by. Jerry stepped out behind him, poised and leaped silently. One hand slammed hard against the orderly's lips, the other hand closed around his throat and squeezed with all the strength Jerry could muster. His thumb manipulated cleverly, found the vulnerable spot which an old Chinese merchant had once taught him.

The orderly wilted suddenly, and Jerry caught him just before he crashed to the floor. He lifted the man, carried him back into the room and closed the door. He ripped a bed sheet into strips, tied, gagged and blindfolded the man before he rolled him under the bed.

Then he stepped back into the hall. No one appeared as he moved toward the door he had picked out. Jerry found it wide open, a chilly draft blowing through the room from the open window. He risked a quick look and his eyes blazed in hatred. He had found Pop Baker and he knew what kind of treatment he was getting in this devil's sanitarium.

Naked, except for a thin hospital gown, Pop lay exposed to the chilly blasts of air. On the floor was a blanket with wires leading from it to where they were plugged into an electric light socket. An electric blanket! So this was how pneumonia was induced at will.

The victim was first probably drugged and injected with pneumonia-coccus culture. Then he was sweated under the intense heat of the blanket. Finally he was exposed to cold air and water was drenched over his body. A series of treatments like this was bound to result in pneumonia with death just as certain as time itself.

JERRY wondered how many other victims were confined to this sanitarium which specialized in administering death instead of treatment to prevent it.

If there were others, they would have

to wait. Pop Baker came first. He had risked his life for an ideal and without thoughts of personal profit.

Jerry got his camera ready for action, suspending it around his neck. The orderly sent up from below was ready to put Pop under the electric blanket again. Jerry aimed the camera and snapped a shot. The orderly heard the click. He looked up, startled, and then reached under his white coat for a gun.

Jerry beat him to it. He launched himself across the room, kicking the door shut as he did so. The orderly had the weapon half-drawn when Jerry hit him. The orderly was taller by six inches and probably fifty pounds heavier, but size meant nothing to the angry news photographer. He banged the orderly just above the heart, causing him to let go of the automatic. The gun dropped back into its holster.

Jerry teased him with a slicing blow that bent the man's nose over. The orderly lost all reasoning then. He crouched, lashed out two vicious punches that would have put Jerry away for hours if they had landed. Both of them whistled through the air. Jerry pounded a swift one to the pit of the orderly's stomach, doubled him up and then quickly reached for the wires strung from the electric blanket. He looped one of them around the man's head.

When the orderly recovered from the effects of that midriff jab, he had to get free of the wires before he could charge forward. He raised his hands to accomplish this, and Jerry closed in. The orderly brought down both arms, wound them around Jerry and clutched him in a bone-breaking embrace.

"Now we'll see if there's sawdust or blood in your veins," he panted. "I'm gonna bust you in half, you little squirt."

Something jabbed the orderly's chest. Jerry chuckled softly.

"Squeeze away, gorilla, but just as soon as I find it hurts, I'll blow your heart through your spine."

The orderly released his grip, licked his lips and backed away under the

threat of his own gun in Jerry's hands. Jerry gestured significantly and the orderly flattened himself against the wall.

"Never let a man get close enough to grab your own gun," Jerry told him in a whisper. "That's very much the same as committing suicide. Now take off your uniform and put it on Pop. I mean the man on the bed. Snap into it, because if anyone happens to come in here, I'll kill you the moment the door opens."

The orderly looked at Jerry's set face, into his cold, uncompromising eyes and hastily began removing his uniform. He put it on Pop Baker and at Jerry's orders slid the hospital gown over his own shoulders.

"Now get into that bed," Jerry snapped. "Pull the electric blanket right up around your head and see how you like this pneumonia treatment. Move!"

The orderly obeyed with an alacrity that would have been amusing under other circumstances. Jerry stepped close, reversed the gun and brought the butt down with scientific precision. In a small linen closet he found sheets, deftly rolled them and tied them together. He fashioned a loop, slid it around Pop's shoulders and gently lowered him to the ground. He slid out of the window himself, using the make-shift rope to reach the ground safely.

He untied Pop, hoisted him to his shoulder and carried him into the garage. There he opened the back of the ambulance, put Pop on the stretcher and strapped him there, covering him well with the ambulance blankets.

Closing the rear door, he set the garage doors ajar slightly and then slid behind the wheel. His foot pressed the starter button and the motor caught. He shifted and pushed the doors wide open by simply driving against them.

Someone fired a shot from one of the second-floor windows. The bullet whanged against the radiator, but seemed to do no damage. Jerry turned out of the drive on two wheels. He glanced around, saw three men racing for cars parked near the sanitarium to

start in pursuit. Jerry hunched himself over the wheel and stepped on it.

He reached the main highway leading back to the city and really let the ambulance roll. He had no siren, but Jerry was an expert driver. He shot in and out of the sparse traffic. Behind him the headlights of the pursuing cars gleamed brilliantly. There were more shots and he prayed that none of them would find a target in Pop's body.

The ambulance was geared for high speeds. Gradually Jerry began pulling away from his pursuers until finally they faded out of sight. He headed for the nearest hospital, helped to wheel Pop into the emergency room and stood by while a house physician made a rapid examination.

"He'll be all right," announced the doctor. "It's not too late to use sulfapyridine, but another hour or so—well, his chances would have been one in a hundred."

CHAPTER IX

THE GO-BETWEEN

 **B**ACK to his purloined ambulance Jerry went, and drove it straight to Van Valken's place. He still had Christine to worry about. The front door of the big house was wide open. He ran in, calling Christine's name. There was no response. He looked for her hat and coat, saw no signs of them and then grabbed the phone. Christine's apartment didn't answer. He dialed Police Headquarters and got Sergeant Orr on the wire.

"I've just about broken the Patterson case," he reported, "but now I need your help. Chris is missing and I think a bunch of racketeers have got her. Listen, Sarge, send out to that sanitarium at the end of Eldsmere Lane. I'll get there ahead of you and do what I can. Tell your men to be ready for action, and for Pete's sake, have 'em hurry!"

Jerry raced back to the ambulance, turned it and headed toward the sanitarium again. There wasn't much hope in his heart. The moment those killers realized Jerry Wade had recognized the setup of the sanitarium, they would run for it.

The sanitarium was ablaze with lights. He jerked out the gun he had taken from the orderly, raced up to the front door and found it unlocked. He went in warily, but not a sound reached him. He investigated the office, found that the files had been stripped and the desk drawers hastily emptied. He ran upstairs to the room where Pop had been undergoing the pneumonia-impelling treatment. The orderly was gone. He heard sirens wailing in the distance. Sergeant Orr certainly had wasted no time, but despite this, they were too late.

Wade waited until Orr came pounding into the place. He explained tersely while he and Orr headed for the cellar. Orr's flashlight swept through the darkness until they found the light switch. There was a small wine cellar at one end of the place. Orr opened the door cautiously, gave a grunt of surprise and went in. Wade followed. There was a dark form on the dirt floor, sprawled out as only a corpse can lie. Orr turned the body over. It was Leon Hayes, the mortician, a stab wound in his chest. He had been dead for hours.

"So it wasn't Hayes—like I'd have sworn it would be," Orr grumbled. "Looks like he never did walk away from the cemetery under his own steam, Wade. Well, nothing else we can do here. You've no idea where they took Chris or who the master mind is?"

"I don't know where they've taken Chris," Wade said sharply. "And if I knew who the brains of the mob was, I wouldn't tell you. Arresting him would automatically spell Christine's death. No, Sarge, they're holding her for one purpose—to get me. They've got to reach me because they know I'm wise to the whole setup. Look, have one of

the boys drive me back to town. They'll make contact and I don't want to miss."

Sergeant Orr grabbed Wade's arm as he turned away. "Listen to me, Jerry. I know what you think of Chris. She's a swell girl. But do you think they'll let her go even if you give yourself up? They'll knock off both of you. Before you do anything rash, tell me everything you know. Give me something to work on. I'll wreck that mob and strap every last one of 'em into the chair."

Jerry grimaced. "That won't save Christine's life. No soap, Sarge. I'll talk, but I'll handle this in my own way. Do I get that ride or shall I drive the ambulance back?"

Orr gave up, followed Jerry to the main floor and gave the necessary orders.

Jerry walked into his apartment with the air of a man doomed and unable to help himself. He hurled his hat onto a chair, slumped in another one and tried to think clearly. Of course, they had Chris. That gorilla might have doubled back, surprised her and pulled a snatch act. Jerry cursed his own stupidity in allowing her to remain alone under those dangerous conditions. His anxiety over Pop had overshadowed anything else. Now Pop was safe, but Chris was doomed.

His phone buzzed. He gripped the instrument so hard that his knuckles ached. The voice that reached him was that of Dexter, the fake loan shark.

"I been calling you every five minutes," Dexter announced. "Listen, wise guy, we got the dame, see. Now here's our proposition. You take a cab to the corner of State and Carmody Streets. Get out and wait. If anybody is trailing you, the dame dies—quick."

"And what happens if I give myself up?" Jerry asked.

"We let the dame go and hold you until we clean up. After that we scram and you can print your little pictures all over every sheet in the country. That's our offer."

"You," Jerry said with an icy calm,

"can go to the devil! You have the girl, yes, but I've got pictures of your entire mob, your victims, even your leader. So I'm in the driver's seat. Tonight's papers will carry shots of evidence enough to plant all of you in the chair. I'll start printing them, saving your leader's face for the last one. If the girl returns unharmed, I'll hold off printing that shot for forty-eight hours. Those are my terms. Take 'em and like 'em. You might also remember that dying in the electric chair is an unpleasant business."

JERRY hung up, wiped sweat from his eyes and quickly removed his coat, entered his dark room and fell to work. Thirty minutes later he phoned Christine's newspaper and had a long talk with the editor. Then, while he waited for the messenger from the paper, he dried his prints between blotters.

The last edition of the evening paper carried scareheads and a series of remarkably clear pictures arranged in rows. The first was a shot of Hayes Funeral Home and below it was captioned:

MURDER WALKED IN HERE

There were pictures of the homes which had been owned by the five victims of the mob. Patterson's place showed clearly, so did Munsel's and the other three. Each carried the same caption.

In another row were more pictures, one showing Dexter threatening Christine, another showing the orderly in the act of slowly murdering Pop Baker. There were shots of the sanitarium. Below these pictures was a blank space with a question mark at one side of it. Below was another caption.

THE FIRST MORNING EDITION WILL REVEAL THE FACE OF THE MURDERER

There was a complete story of the crime ring and its deeds. Pictures of

the victims were dug out of the newspaper morgue and printed. For sensation this story topped all else, forcing even news of the cold war into the back part of the paper.

But Jerry derived no satisfaction from it. He kept looking at the clock, wondering if he had misjudged the character of the ringleader. During the time which had elapsed between his work in the dark room and the actual printing of his pictures, Jerry had been intensely busy. Once more he broke the law by invading a house and prowling through it until he discovered what he wanted. He visited Mrs. Munsel and her brother-in-law again, and this time they talked. Both were on the verge of hysteria until Jerry soothed them and extracted the entire story.

Shortly after midnight he was pacing the floor of his apartment, chewing on an unlit cigarette, glancing out of the window every time he passed it. He was playing for high stakes, Christine's life against the information he had. The killer was bound to respect that information. It should keep him from killing Christine, but Jerry wasn't sure.

Still, there was absolutely nothing else he could do. If he gave himself up to the band of killers, he'd be murdered and the chances that they'd keep their word and release Chris were so few as to be hardly worth counting. If their positions had been reversed, with himself in Christine's place, Jerry wouldn't have minded so much. But a girl in the hands of men like Dexter. Jerry shuddered, forced himself to think straight and lit a match.

He forgot to touch it to the end of his frayed cigarette.

Then someone knocked softly on his door. Jerry's blood froze. It was here now. This must be word from the gang. The impelling influence of that blank space in the newspaper was bound to make their leader wary. That had been the sole method which Jerry was sure would both force his hand and at the same time keep Christine alive.

He opened the door and started back in amazement. Imbrie, the investigator for the Woodrow Insurance Company, came in, puffing badly.

"Wade, I have news. The gang now appears to be afraid to get into contact with you because they think you may have set a trap for them. But those newspaper pictures have scared them stiff, too. They phoned me, and of course I agreed to act."

"Who phoned you?" Jerry demanded harshly.

IMBRIE frowned. "I don't know. The call came from a pay station and the voice was not familiar to me. They gave me a few hours to get the picture. I don't even know how they will make actual contact. Anyway, they have a new proposition. You have blown the whole case wide open with that story and those pictures. They're positive you'll print the picture of the man who leads them. They know it's impossible for him to get away and—he happens to hold the money bags so the rest of the mob is stymied. See how it works?"

Jerry brought his fist smacking into the palm of his other hand. "Then I've got them. What of the girl?"

Imbrie sighed. "They still have her. You are to give me the print and negative which is so dangerous. When I surrender it they will turn the girl over to me. Complicated enough, but it seems fair. In fact, there is no other way it could be handled. Look, here is my advice. In dealing with men like those who form this mob, you have to hold out. Suppose you print an extra picture and keep it. After the girl is returned, you can do as you like about printing it. Personally, I'd enlarge the thing and post one on every single building in this town."

Jerry sat down heavily.

"Supposing," he said gloomily, "that I don't have such a picture, that all this is sheer bluff. Maybe I don't even know who the leader of the mob is. Then what kind of advice would you give me?"

IMBRIE whistled softly. "I really don't know. I hadn't thought you'd be bluffing. Are you?"

Jerry got up, rubbed a hand across his eyes. "I have no picture, Imbrie. The devil who directs that mob left no clues whatsoever, but we must carry out this bluff. I have a negative, a very dark one especially prepared. They'll never make out the identity of the subject. You take this and tell them it's the picture. I'll arrange for a police squad to cover you and nail the contact man. It's the only possible way."

Jerry disappeared into his dark room. When he emerged, with his Speed Graphic, he held a negative in his hand. He gave this to Imbrie who took it and studied the thing intently.

Without looking up he said: "It's a very slim chance, Wade. I'll do it, of course, but I'd have sworn from that newspaper story that you really did have the picture. It sounded too real for a bluff of this kind."

"Look up!" Jerry said tensely.

Imbrie raised his head. Jerry held his camera at the proper angle. The insurance detective's face presented a full view, the flash flared as he snapped a picture. Jerry lowered the camera, smiled without a trace of mirth in his eyes and walked toward an open window. Suddenly he flung the camera out of it, looked down at the street and spoke in a loud voice.

"Take that to the city editor—fast. He is not to have the shot developed until deadline. Run for it."

Imbrie jumped to his feet. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded hotly. "That—that was my picture you took. I don't understand."

"Sit down and stop bluffing," Jerry said quietly. "When I told you I didn't have a picture of the killer, that happened to be the truth. But I have his picture now, and it's on its way to the office of the news syndicate I work for. Imbrie, you're behind this. No one else could be. No matter what happens to me, that picture will be flashed across

the next editions and bring the police on your neck. They'll discover what I already know."

CHAPTER X

PRINT THAT PICTURE!



MBRIE'S eyes narrowed. He folded both arms across his chest, but Jerry knew what was happening.. One hand was stealthily sliding under his coat to grasp a shoulder-holstered gun.

"Look here," Imbrie ground out, "I know the fact that your girl's peril must be preying on you, but great heavens, man, don't let me make you go berserk. How in the world could I be the leader of that gang? My job is to run people like that down."

"It was, Imbrie. You changed it because there was a lot more profit in your scheme. Listen, and I'll tell you just how it all worked. If you wish, go ahead and pull a gun on me. But remember regardless of what happens to me, that picture will be printed. I'm the only one who can stop it—and to stop it I've got to be alive."

Imbrie jerked the gun free, sat down and kept the weapon pointing squarely at Jerry's chest.

"Go ahead and talk," he snarled. "I still think you're bluffing."

Jerry Wade put one foot on a straight-backed chair. "The man who posed as Van Valken sought out the National Loan Company," Wade said. "Of all the victims he was the only one to do this. You, with access to the files of the insurance company, could check on big policies that were ready to lapse because the insured was broke. With these tips you had the National Loan Company, which you doubtless own, seek out these men and offer to lend them money to pay the premiums. Naturally they were glad to consent."

"Then you had them call the beneficiary and give orders that the instruc-

tions of your men were to be followed. That was a vague statement, and purposely so. You had Dex Dillon—I picked his face out of the rogues' gallery—handle this end. He called on the beneficiary, told that person he was helping the insured apparently to die so that the policy could be cashed. Naturally they believed him after the phone call the insured had made.

"You arranged everything neatly, even to forcing the beneficiary to sign a document giving you a cut. Not that you expected to collect on it. Then the beneficiary reported the insured man missing. A few days later a corpse was planted in the morgue, a corpse that bore some resemblance to the insured. The beneficiary picked it out, had it prepared for burial and entombed. The policy was paid because you, as investigator, approved the claim. So far there was no money in it for you."

"So far it's the most fantastic nonsense I've ever heard," Imbrie snapped.

"Shortly after the funeral the beneficiary received a letter in the handwriting of the insured, which you compelled him to write. It gave instructions that two-thirds of the money was to be sent to a cover address where it would be picked up. That was done. Then you really showed your fangs, Imbrie.

"You called upon the beneficiary. You identified yourself as an investigator and informed your victim that you knew this was all faked. You even presented the document the beneficiary had signed to clinch your proof. Then you demanded the rest of the money. It was turned over to you because the beneficiary really believed the insured was still alive."

Jerry paid no attention to the gun in Imbrie's hand. He stepped over to the desk beside which Imbrie sat and pushed the phone over toward the insurance man. It was an old-fashioned, upright instrument.

"Have I told you enough?" Jerry asked. "Will you now phone your men and have them release the girl?"

Imbrie parted his lips in a cruel smile.

"That's a swell yarn, Wade, but it certainly doesn't involve me. Why should I do any phoning?"

"Then I'll go on," Jerry said. He showed none of the anxiety that raged within him. "The insured men were taken prisoner and cleverly murdered. They were doped to make them weak, filled with pneumococcus germs, and then tucked under electric blankets until their temperature was high. Then they were exposed to cold breezes and doused in ice water. There could be only one result—pneumonia. They died quickly. You saw to that."

"Then you really pulled a neat trick. You removed the substitute corpse from the grave and interred the real insured man. If the beneficiary ever did defy you and go to the police, a disinterment would only reveal that the insured really was dead—of pneumonia, just as the death certificate attested—and the police would believe the beneficiary afflicted with some form of insanity. Now shall I tell you how positive I am you are the man who directed all this? Beside the fact that of all suspects you alone could have picked your victims unerringly?"

"Go ahead," Imbrie challenged. "It's very funny."

THE NEWS photographer took a deep breath and spoke in harsh accusing tones:

"Hugh Patterson was one of the victims. His heir, in all probability, refused to cooperate unless he actually saw Patterson and knew he was alive. Therefore you permitted Patterson to attend his own funeral so that he would be seen by his son. Then you murdered him. Not by giving him pneumonia, however. There was no time for that. The night his son was killed, you were in the house, hiding in his room.

"When the son discovered that his father really was dead, he was ready to spill everything, but first he went to his room and talked to you. You had no alternative. You killed him, tried to make it look like suicide, and fled by way of the

window and the oak tree that happened to brush against the house. There is where you slipped."

Jerry walked over to a clothes closet and took a suit from it.

"You wore this suit that night. It was dark and you didn't notice that the oak tree had been recently sprayed against insects. The poison got all over you. It wouldn't come off. I saw the smudges the first time I met you and wondered about them because you were so careful about your appearance. I stole this suit from your rooms. The blotches have been analyzed and they compare with the tree poison. Now, do we talk?"

Imbrie stepped close to Jerry and thrust the muzzle of his gun against his chest. His facial expression was terrible. "I'll do the talking. You phone that city editor, tell him not to develop that picture, that it was a mistake."

"I'll do it—provided you tell me where you have Christine Stuart held. I'll take my chances on getting her once you assure me she is still alive. And there's only one way to do that—by letting her talk to me on the phone."

Imbrie snarled out a curse, reached for the phone and automatically tried to dial it. There was no dial.

"It's connected with the switchboard downstairs," Jerry explained. "Just give the operator the number."

"Hand me that phone book," Imbrie blurted. "I'll let you talk to her. But I'm taking no chances with you, Wade. She's held in a rat hole known as the Lawrence Hotel. Find the number for me. You can even phone for me. Ask for Room Three Hundred and Two."

Jerry searched through the telephone book, closed it with a bang.

"I don't trust you either," he said. "That may be a signal to have Dex murder the girl, after which you'd murder me. You've got to convince me first."

"You fool!" Imbrie cried. "I'll surrender the girl because I can't take any chances on doing anything else. Go ahead. Call the hotel and you'll know she's still alive."

Jerry crossed his legs and regarded the tip of his shoe for a few moments while Imbrie raged. Then Jerry looked up at the clock. He arose and walked over to the phone. Then he sat down again and shook his head.

"You'll double-cross me. I've got to think of some other way. And while I think of it, why did you murder Hayes, the undertaker?"

Imbrie was sweating profusely and almost frantic in terror. "I'll tell you everything if it will prove I'm not trying a double-cross. The minute Hayes saw the substitute corpse, he knew who had done the embalming job. His man Vogel was about the poorest hand at that work I've ever seen. I'm sorry I picked him, but I needed someone to do the work and I had enough on Vogel to force him to obey me. He could watch things at the funeral, too. Vogel listened while you talked Hayes into going to the cemetery. I sent two men to stop you, but they got lost and were almost too late."

"And Hayes' wife?" Jerry asked. "She was snatched to make it appear that Hayes had gone away on a vacation. What happened to her?"

"She's with the girl. Hayes died from a stab. You'll find his body at the sanitarium. Now are you convinced?"

The door of Jerry's apartment was suddenly flung wide. Sergeant Orr, gun in his hand, stepped in. Imbrie gave a wild yell and yanked the trigger of his weapon, but Orr fired a split-second ahead of him. Imbrie was hurled back by the slug that smashed his shoulder.

JERRY gave a leap across the room, pinned Imbrie's gun hand down and wrested the weapon loose.

"You'll be sorry," Imbrie yelled. "That girl will get killed. They'll slit her throat. They'll—"

Imbrie's words turned into a gurgle of astonishment. Christine was running into Jerry's arms. Jerry spoke to her softly, then he faced Imbrie.

"Smart guy, aren't you? Listen, heel, every word you said in this room was

picked up by that specially fixed telephone and broadcast to the radio division of Police Headquarters which happens to be just across the street. It was automatically rebroadcast to every radio car in the city. Within two minutes after you named the hideout, the cops were there. There are hundreds of witnesses to your confession."

Imbrie slumped deeper in his chair with a groan. Sergeant Orr yanked him to his feet, piloted him to the door.

"Wait a minute, Sarge," Jerry called out. "There's one more thing I want Imbrie to hear."

Jerry pulled out a drawer in his desk, lifted a regulation type telephone out of it and dialed a number.

"This," he said into the receiver, "is Jerry Wade. Christine is safe. You have the story. Now send it out over the teletypes under her by-line. Oh, yes—the picture! Blow it up and send copies out too, so all the papers can slap it all over page one. A guy named Imbrie would like to see himself in the news."

DEATH WATCH

(Continued from page 90)

she'd never been friendly with the neighbors.

Her eyes followed the path of weak light coming through the transom, saw the corner of her father's table and the edge of the rug.

Laura took a deep breath and rose. Quickly, she headed for the big light over the table. She stumbled over a footstool and whimpered weakly in the silence. Then she had the cord in her hand, and she jerked it.

In the brilliant glow she saw Sliver, standing there not three feet away.

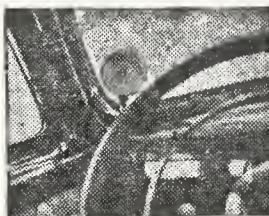
She started to scream, and a rough, dirty hand stifled it. She saw the light go out, and then she was clawing, kicking, trying to bite the strong fingers.

She felt pain as his shoe crashed her ankle, and then his other hand was at her throat. If she could only make a noise. She could feel unconsciousness coming, and there was a pounding in her ears. She was sure the pounding,

[Turn page]

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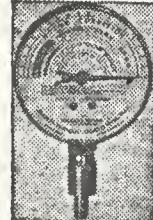
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the shouting she heard was a part of the nightmare . . .

WHEN she opened her eyes, Laura was lying on the bed and Sergeant Plotkin was sitting placidly in a chair nearby. There was another man standing at the foot of the bed, his red hair flaming in the brilliant light.

"I've been sleeping in the shack," Red was saying. "I kept the light out, most of the time. I could watch the back door and the front from there. And her window, too. I saw the bright light go on, and saw him standing there, and I didn't wait to phone the cops or anything. I just tore up here."

"It's a lucky thing you did," Plotkin said. "What did you hit him with?"

"A jack handle. I guess I went a bit off the beam. Hit him more than I had to. He isn't—he's not—"

"Dead?" Plotkin said. "No. We'll bring him around, all right. He'll live until we burn him."

"I love her," Red said. "She's everything to me. She'll be all right, won't she?"

"I'm all right, now," Laura said. "Come here, darling. Come hold me."

It was after Plotkin had left, and Laura was making coffee, that Red told her, "I've been over to the Veterans Administration, and talking to the bank. I think we can swing a small home on a G.I. loan. I'll quit school—"

"You'll what?" Laura said indignant-ly. "You listen to me, Mr. Dugan. You're going to finish your education! And we're both going to continue working until you do! We've plenty of time for home later."

Red stared at her. "But, honey, where will we live?"

She stared right back at him. "And what's wrong with this place? You're not starting to put on airs, I hope. This is a perfectly respectable, inexpensive apartment, and close to your work, besides. Just think, I can watch you while you're working."

Red grinned at her. "And I can wave to you, huh?"

She sighed, and her heart was filled with peace. "And you can wave to me," she agreed.

HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 9)

suitcase and in it they claim they have found the gun with which the deed has been committed!

Twice escaping the clutches of his nemesis, Detective John McAdams, hemmed in on all sides by foes clamoring for his blood, Nick Fenner takes the boldest step that it is possible for him to take. He goes directly to the home of the man he is supposed to have slain and directly across the desk where the killing was perpetrated, he faces Ellen Standish, the daughter of the man he is accused of murdering!

You take it on from there, folks! Let us assure you this is a deeply and sensitively plotted mystery story, with action galore every minute of the way.

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There will, of course, be our usual quota of short detective and mystery stories, to round out a splendid issue. Now, let's hear what our friends among you readers have to say!

OUR MAIL BOX

THE "cold war" among our readers seems to have wound up in a dead heat—which is synonymous for a tie, a Mexican standoff, a draw or what have you. We are referring, of course, to the roughneck vs. highbrow detective and all the various facets, pro and con, "touchin' on an' appertainin' to," as a well-known Police Chief here in New York was once wont to say.

One of our readers comes up with an idea that we'd partially adopted—and

[Turn page]

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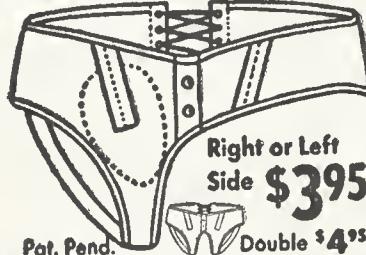
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whether we'll keep it up or not depends on reader response. Anyway, here is the gentleman's letter:

I know all the old nursery rhymes about old things being best and old friends and old wine, et cetera, et cetera and so on ad infinitum. But no matter how old a thing is, it must have been new at one time. There was that first edition of "A Study in Scarlet" wherein the experimental character of Sherlock Holmes first burst upon an unsuspecting British public. Oh, poor dear Doctor Doyle—what are you responsible for! And so, dear as our regularly-featured characters Race Williams, or Nick Ransom and the rest of them have become to us, they DO get a little tiresome at times.

Why not surprise us by giving us one or two NEW detectives every issue? They needn't necessarily be by new authors—although that's an idea too. Keep mixing 'em up—sneaking over an experiment or two. In that way maybe we'll come up with a Sherlock Holmes or a Nero Wolf or something. What say? Of course your records will show I've written before and thanks for printing my previous effusion.—M. J. G. Griggs, Bronx, N. Y., N. Y.

Thank you, kind sir, and we remember your previous epistle. Don't say we didn't warn you if brand new detectives come a-rattlin' at you like bullets out of a machinegun. There'll be a new one next issue, anyway. Again, thank you for a good suggestion and a swell letter!

Here's a left-handed gripe that is meant, we are quite sure, for our own good. It's a sort of a follow-up on a previous letter, as you will be able to see quite clearly for yourself.

Hooray for that Mr. Hollingsworth from out in Ioway somewhere, who takes such sensible issue with the cliches or "bromides" as he so correctly says we used to call them. Not only do your characters "lick dry lips" as Mr. H. points out, they go on to "bite their lower lip" or "chew their lower lip" and so on. So help me—if this keeps up, they'll have no faces left and won't that be sompin'! Also your men and women "sink their nails into the palms of their hands until the blood runs" or they clinch their fists "until the knuckles show white." My—oh my! Such shenanigans! Wha' happen?—Ernest Beverly, Hackensack, N. J.

Well, Ernest old chap, as we wrote to Mr. Hollingsworth, those things creep in. First one writer does it and gets away with it and then another follows suit and like Tennyson's brook, it will "go on forever." All we can do is to keep a weather eye open. Many thanks for calling the matter to our attention.

A young lady in Baltimore writes:

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Thank you, Jane. And here's another:

Your magazine is certainly bigger and better now—and I'm all for it in its new format. Keep up the improvement.—Edward Jack Henler, Detroit, Mich.

Thanks, Ed. And keeping up the improvement is just what we hope to do—in fact, our motto since the establishment of this magazine has been, "Every issue better than the one before."

Here's just a bit of praise from a rather young man which we've had to fix up a bit. We thought it was rather on the cute side.

I got a book about THRILLING DETECTIVE. I like the stories very much. I try to write mystery stories and I wonder if you would be interested in the one I have. I would like you to publish it if you are interested. It is about a mystery at night.—Ammer Teen Abnathey, Chicago, Ill.

Think you'll have to get a little more schooling, Ammer, before you start writing mystery stories. It isn't nearly as easy as it looks. Anyway, we admire your spirit and courage and we thank you for writing in.

That goes for all you kind folks who've taken the trouble to write us. Keep those letters and post cards streaming along in and we'll get around to printing yours one of these days. It is only through your letters that we are able to keep our pulse upon your genuine tastes in fiction.

Kindly send all communications to The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. All your letters are carefully read and studied—and the more letters, the better the magazine.

Hope to see you all next issue and happy reading to everybody!

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